

Acclaim for Michael Wilding

'Wilding's writing is rich in humour, fantasy and sharp social observation'
– BRUCE BENNETT, *Contemporary Novelists*.

'The literature of challenge rather than the literature of escape' – CHRIS DE BONO, *Melbourne Herald*.

'If, like most of us, you've begun to sense that life is not quite so simple, then maybe Wilding is exactly who you should be reading' – DAVID ENGLISH, *Australian*.

'Work of high and lasting merit ... To be a writer like Wilding is to be whole in a sense that should never be lost, not as long as the written word appears between the pages of a literary book' – DON GRAHAM, *Antipodes*.

'A career that is remarkable for how prolific and innovative it has been in so many areas' – PETER PIERCE, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

Academia Nuts – 'Wilding at his absolute satirical best' – DAVID WILLIAMSON.
'Very clever, in the grand tradition of Lucky Jim' – *Guardian*, UK. 'A witty campus novel? In 2004? It seemed as likely as a holiday romance set amid the tropical delights of Guantanamo Bay ... But it is very funny. So funny that I had to stop reading it in bed in case my roars of laughter were disturbing the neighbours: so funny that it deserves to be the final great campus novel. It is unlikely to be challenged. For what Wilding's aged unreconstructed dons are playing with such absurd brio is unmistakably the last waltz' – LAURIE TAYLOR, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*.

Aspects of the Dying Process – 'One of the best writers of short stories in Australia today' – *Australian Book Review*. 'The short story writer as sociologist, the short story writer as photo-realist ... Wilding can accurately pace a story and make a woman ironical and elusive in just a few sentences' – *Times Literary Supplement*.

Book of the Reading – 'A collector's gem from the press Wilding founded with Robert Adamson. Classic stories from memorable readings' – RICHARD CRABTREE.

Great Climate – 'Erotic, fiercely intelligent and mordantly funny' – JANETTE TURNER HOSPITAL. 'His stories subvert and transcend not only sexual and social conventions ... but story-telling itself' – JIM CRACE. '21st-century writing for 21st-century people' – J. P. DONLEAVY.

Living Together – 'A very funny book and a perfect picture of the people, the time, the place' – DAVID MARR, *Bulletin*. 'He is so exhilaratingly adept with narrative you cannot put the book down ... Wilding's pen is sharp as a rapier' – JAN MEEK, *Vogue Australia*.

Pacific Highway – ‘Much the narrator recounts issues from his consumption of hallucinogenics ... but just how much? Where in his account of events does the actual end and his paranoid perception of it begin? And could his suspicions that global conspiracies are behind unwelcome developments in this otherwise near Arcady or Eden be justified? ... humorous ... menacing ...’ – BRIAN KIERNAN, *Running Wild*.

The Phallic Forest – ‘Elegantly written and evocative ... an undercurrent of sensitivity and searching for truths’ – JEAN BEDFORD, *National Times*.

Raising Spirits, Making Gold and Swapping Wives: the True Adventures of Dr John Dee and Sir Edward Kelly – ‘The story of Queen Elizabeth I’s necromancer, John Dee, as transcribed from original documents interspersed with Michael Wilding’s own words. A piece of esoterica designed to startle and delight the modern reader’ – PETER PORTER, *The Economist Books of the Year*.

Scenic Drive – ‘Takes you on a trip that shouldn’t be missed ... a memorable book, sexy and funny. Once you read it, you’ll want to turn all your friends on to it’ – *Los Angeles Star*. ‘First rate fiction’ – DICK HIGGINS, *Newsaart*.

The Short Story Embassy – ‘The best of the talent emerging from down under’ – *San Francisco Review of Books*. ‘Considerable entertainment’ – *Times Literary Supplement*.

Somewhere New – ‘One of the most consistently interesting and visionary contemporary writers’ – DON GRAHAM, *Antipodes*. ‘Essential reading’ – ROBERT YEO, *Straits Times*.

The West Midland Underground – ‘Ensures his status as one of the most interesting writers now working here’ – *Australian*.

This is for You – ‘What strikes one first, apart from the impressive merits of individual stories, is Wilding’s keen sense of literary integrity ... Wilding’s voice in these stories is always one to attend to: an ironic, witty, highly educated, and, in its indirect way, passionate authorial persona who has believed in literature as a life of principle, has seen many of the bases of that belief assaulted by abstruse theory, trendy anti-realism, and sinecure-seeking cynicism, and yet still in the face of everything, is able to make the affirming act through the agency of fiction ... no one in English writes better fiction about the process of writing than Wilding’ – DON GRAHAM.

Wildest Dreams – an Australian Book of the Year. ‘Deserves to be thought of as a contemporary classic’ – ADRIAN CAESAR, *Running Wild*.

Wild Amazement – ‘Anyone interested in how contemporary Australian writing came to be the way it is, with its strengths and follies, its cliques and patrons, and the challenges it faces, will benefit from reading Wilding’s sensitive, sometimes bitchy, often funny and always intelligent tracing of his life’s trajectory’ – PETER CORRIS, *Quadrant*. ‘A terrific memoir. I enjoyed it immensely’ – PETER COLEMAN.

National Treasure



Also by Michael Wilding

Aspects of the Dying Process
Living Together
The Short Story Embassy
The West Midland Underground
Scenic Drive
Marcus Clarke
The Phallic Forest
The Tabloid Story Pocket Book (ed)
Political Fictions
Pacific Highway
Reading the Signs
The Paraguayan Experiment
The Man of Slow Feeling
Under Saturn
Dragons Teeth
Great Climate
Her Most Bizarre Sexual Experience
The Radical Tradition
Social Visions
The Oxford Book of Australian Short Stories (ed)
This is for You
Book of the Reading
Somewhere New: New & Selected Stories
Studies in Classic Australian Fiction
Wildest Dreams
Raising Spirits, Making Gold & Swapping Wives; the True Adventures of Dr John Dee & Sir Edward Kelly
Academia Nuts
Wild Amazement
Best Stories Under the Sun (ed with David Myers)

National Treasure
by
Michael Wilding



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To David Williamson



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Chapter 1

Plant slipped down lower in his car seat as the man down the street was beaten up. He was quite a young man being beaten up, and the men beating him up were quite young too. So was Plant for that matter. Young. This was a young country. A young culture. They seemed to know what they were doing, the men doing the beating up. At least, to Plant's admittedly untutored eye, they seemed to. They were being quite methodical. It didn't look like a matter of blind impassioned rage, whatever that might have looked like. If he had had to try to find the appropriate words he would probably have said they were working him over. It was not a form of words he had used before. He had never had cause to. But the phrase came to hand now as the right words in the right place.

He lit the joint he had been rolling, using the car lighter, no naked flame, it was like being in the trenches in the Great War, the war to end all wars that still continued, be careful, no point drawing attention and attracting enemy action. For the same reason, in part, he just sat there rather than driving off. To start the car would be to draw attention to himself. Who knew but there was someone in another car,

waiting, watching, who might ram him if he tried to drive off. There were all sorts of possibilities. The joint encouraged them, unlocked the doors of thought. He checked his own doors were locked. He didn't want to be dragged out into the street and worked over, however unemotionally and objectively it might be done.

He inhaled, how unlike the home life of that poor ex-president, and studied the scene unemotionally and objectively. It wasn't in some deserted warehouse or abandoned dockside or post-industrial wasteland. It was quite unlike the movies. It was in gentrified inner-city Sydney. Just off one of the main streets with its row of cafés and restaurants. Up on the main street people were sitting in the windows or out at the pavement tables chewing into their well pounded veal and octopus, filleting their whole fish or nibbling at their rucolla salad, sipping up their granitos through the crushed ice, getting stuck into their sambuccas, stirring their flat whites and short blacks, gazing transfixed, doing deals, speaking into their mobile phones, maybe even ordering beatings up. And just round the corner, down the street from the Anglican church and the police station, two young men were reducing a third to a bruised and broken bleeding pulp. Well, not really a pulp, that was an import from the pulps themselves, not a matter of unemotional and objective observation. It was worth practising objective observation when the opportunity arose. It was like a spell-check on a personal computer, it highlighted the words that had come out wrong. Some of them, anyway.

After a while the two men doing the beating up stopped what they were doing and got into a late model BMW and drove off. Plant sat there just in case. He rolled a joint while

he sat there, just in case. It passed the time, but no one else appeared, the BMW did not return, the street remained empty. He got out of his car and walked down to the figure on the pavement.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Do I bleeding look like I'm all right?' asked the figure, speaking with some lack of clarity, his lips and nose exuding blood and mucus.

'Well, you look like you're bleeding, all right,' said Plant. 'Do you want me to call an ambulance?' He kept his hands in his pockets so there was no risk of touching blood or anything. It was not just the general unwisdom of touching blood these latter days. He'd never liked to touch it. He didn't especially like to see it either, for that matter. But if it was there then why pass it by? That was his philosophy.

The figure on the pavement groaned.

'Was that yes?' asked Plant.

'Don't need an ambulance. Just give me a lift.'

'Where to?' Plant asked.

'Balmain.'

'Balmain? That's not far.'

'I know it's not far but you don't think I'm going to fucking walk there,' said the figure on the pavement. 'You offered me a lift, didn't you?'

'No problems,' said Plant. 'Just wait there and I'll bring the car up.'

'I'm not going to be fucking walking anywhere in a fucking hurry, am I, mate?' said the figure on the pavement.

'Probably not,' agreed Plant.

Plant drove slowly down the long narrow road down the

long narrow promontory. He scented wealth and crime and pretension and corruption amidst the parked four-wheel drives and roaming Afghans, rich pickings if they could be prized out of such anal retentiveness. Plant's battered cargo gave a croak of recognition as they reached a house with a fire engine red Jeep Wrangler standing in the driveway and a silver metallic paint Volvo in the open garage. A man of charity in such circumstances, he parked on the pavement and helped the object of his charity out of his humble Hyundai and up to the front door. He rang the bell. A woman's voice called out down the hallway, 'Who is it?'

Plant turned to his prize. Who was it indeed?

'What's your name?' he asked.

The figure just leaned against the doorframe.

'Ring the bell,' it said.

Plant rang it again.

'Who is it?' the woman called out.

'Where's fucking Scobie?' said the figure.

It could have gone on like this all night, questions endlessly repeated and unanswered.

In the end the nameless one slid down the doorframe and slumped into a heap, banging his head into the lower panels.

There was a sustained performance of keys turning and bolts being pulled back. The door opened a fraction and a suspicious eye peered over the safety chain.

'I've got someone who's been hurt,' said Plant.

'Well we don't want them,' said the woman.

'He asked to be brought here,' said Plant.

'Who is he?'

'I don't know his name,' said Plant.

"'Fucking me,' said the slumped figure.

The chain was unhooked and the door opened. The woman looked at the slumped figure in the doorway.

'Well you can't bring him in here,' the woman said. 'He's covered in blood. It will get all over everything. It will ruin the carpets.'

Plant stood there.

'Take him away,' she said.

'He's not mine,' said Plant. 'I don't even know who he is.'

'Why did you bring him here?' the woman asked.

She was in her late thirties or early forties, or her twenties or her fifties, how could you ever tell? Rich. Rich clothes, rich hair-do, rich bangles.

'He gave this address,' said Plant.

'Well take him back where you found him.'

'He's hurt,' said Plant. 'He's been beaten up.'

'I can see that,' she said.

'I saw it too,' said Plant. 'While it happened.'

She showed no interest.

'Don't bleed all over the doorstep,' she said.

'Bleed where I bleeding well like,' said the figure.

She moved back into the hallway and began to close the door. The slumped figure had slumped its way inside and blocked the door's movement.

'Oh, really,' she said. She said it quite well, really, that superior exasperation. Plant could not but admire.

'Get him off there,' she said.

She opened the door wider again and pushed her foot against the figure to roll it out. It didn't budge.

'What is it, darling?' a voice called out from the top of the stairs. A male voice, more or less. A bit tenor, perhaps,

counter-tenor, maybe.

'Nothing,' she said.

'Might be nothing to you,' said the slumped figure. It cleared its throat disgustingly and spat out a glob of blood and saliva onto the hall-carpet.

'That's it,' said the woman. 'Out you go. You're not spitting your teeth out on my carpet. Drag him away before I call the police.'

'Don't call the police,' said the voice at the top of the stairs. 'Why would you call the police? You never call the police.'

'Fucking Scobie,' said the slumped figure.

Fucking Scobie descended the stairs. He seemed to have spat out his own teeth some time earlier. He descended the stairs in a dragon-embossed dressing gown like a stage-magician's cloak, his bifocals perched uncertainly on his nose.

'Fullalove,' he said. 'What happened to you?'

'What's it look like happened to me?'

'It looks like you got into a fight.'

'I'm not having him in here,' said the woman. 'I don't want blood all over the carpets.'

'Blood on the carpets, blood on the snow, blood on the sand, blood on the wattle, blood on the tracks, who wrote that?'

'Douglas Stewart,' said Fullalove.

'That was *Fire on the Snow*,'

said Scobie.

'Yes it was,' said Scobie. He turned back up the hall and went into a room.

'*Blood on the Snow*,'

he said, re-emerging with volume two of *A History of Australian Literature*.

'Stop playing Trivial Pursuit and get rid of him,' said the woman.

'Claudia, darling,' said Scobie.

'Put that stupid book down and just do it,' she said.

'We can't throw him out like that.'

'Well take him into the laundry and clean him up.'

'Take me into the laundry, Scobie,' said the figure.

Scobie bent down and put his arm under the figure and got him upright. They headed up the hallway.

'Not through the house,' screamed Claudia. 'Take him up the back.'

They dutifully staggered out onto the step and along the front of the house to a lattice door at the side. They kicked their way through it. It swung to behind them. The front door slammed. The light in the hall went off.

Plant stood for a while. Then he walked back to his car and drove to the end of the street. He had to, it was too narrow to turn in. He rolled another joint and smoked it in the park at Long Nose Point, looking down the harbour towards the bridge, watching the waters of the harbour stream by black and fast. There was nothing else to do. Not immediately. Except roll another one, the first having burnt out so quickly in the chill wind rushing past there.

Chapter 2

Plant sat in his seedy flat and contemplated things. There was no doubt about the seediness. Not exactly a matter of no escaping the seediness. He wouldn't have put it like that. He was determined to escape the seediness. It had been a matter of finding the right means and now he felt he might have found them. He pulled on his boots. His Baxter's. The wholesome Australian image. When in doubt be rural and nationalist. A primary producer. That rarely failed either. And flat heels. Not the R. M. Williams boots the poets wore. They were strictly for the station hands. The ruling class always wore flat heels. He was a country boy. He knew a thing or two.

He knew of Scobie for a start. Scobie Spruce. The National Treasure. Or at least A National Treasure. An icon. One of the crown jewels. Shortly to be republican jewels. The PM had said so, or the state premier, one of those momentary men of the moment untouched as yet by the royal commission into paedophilia, concrete pouring, casino operations or travel expenditure. Scobie Spruce, the private man, the intensely modest, the retreating, reclusive embodiment of public diffidence, for ever obscured behind an upraised

hand across the mouth, like Brecht without the cigar.

'I so dislike giving interviews, all the paraphernalia of publicity,' Scobie announced each week, and often twice at weekends, the signature tune of his press statements, sound bites, love bites and, whenever he could get them, television appearances. Stretching into the cameras on his built-up heels. No Baxter's for him.

Still, Plant reflected, morning being the time for reflection, the white disc of the moon still in the cloudless blank Australian sky, however devious Scobie might be with the media was beside the point. It was a break. A crack in the concrete fortifications. He proposed to insert himself into it.

No one answered the doorbell. He rang it two, three times but there was no sound within. He tried again in the middle of the day. But it wasn't until his third visit in the late afternoon, around four-thirty, that he raised anybody. Scobie answered the door, pyjama'd, toothless, his hair in that winning, dishevelled display of genius beloved of photographers.

'There's no one here,' he said.

'I just came round to see if everything was all right,' said Plant.

'Yes,' said Scobie. 'Everything's excellent.'

'Has he recovered?'

'Who?' said Scobie.

'The man who was beaten up.'

'The man who was beaten up?' said Scobie, blankly. 'The man who knew too much. The man who never was. The man who was Thursday. The man who loved islands. A man for all seasons. A man and a woman. Man shy.'

'I brought him round last night.'

'Brought him round?' said Scobie. 'From unconsciousness?'

'You took him to the laundry.'

'Oh him,' said Scobie. 'Fullalove.'

'Is he all right?'

'I expect so,' said Scobie. 'Claudia called a cab and sent him home.'

'He doesn't live here?'

'No,' said Scobie. 'No, he's my research assistant.'

'Research assistant?' said Plant.

'For my novels,' said Scobie. 'I'm a novelist.'

'I know,' said Plant.

'Do you?' said Scobie, brightening.

'One of my favourites,' said Plant.

'One – ?' said Scobie, tentatively.

'My favourite,' said Plant a bit louder, as if repeating for the hearing impaired or foreigners. 'I've read everything you've written,' he said.

'Did you like them?'

'I thought they were tremendous.'

'Tremendous?'

'Brilliant.'

'Brilliant?'

'Works of genius.'

'Works of genius,' said Scobie. 'Come and have some coffee. I'll make some coffee.'

He shuffled down the hallway. Plant followed, paintings and photographs of Scobie on each wall, interspersed with framed posters of readings he had given and the cover art of books he had published.

The kitchen was appalling. The sink was full of saucepans soaking, unwashed plates stacked on the draining board, the table piled with cereal boxes, milk cartons, newspapers, envelopes. Lurid green potatoes sprouted long purple tendrils from a polystyrene box on the floor. Scobie wove his way amidst it all, found coffee in a tin on the table, cups in the dishwasher, coffee pot in the sink.

'Which ones have you read?' he asked.

'All of them.'

'How many times?' he asked.

'Three times at least,' said Plant. 'Some four.'

'I'm writing a new one,' Scobie said.

'Really?'

'Of course.'

'No, I meant really as in marvellous.'

'It will be,' said Scobie.

Plant moved a stack of *New York Review of Books* from a chair to the floor. They were not the sort of thing he cared to place his buttocks on.

'It'll be a sensation,' said Scobie.

'What's it about?'

'I'll tell you in a moment,' said Scobie, counting out spoons of coffee on his fingers.

He sat down and rummaged through the clutter on the table. He found a bottle of pills and shook out a couple.

The windows looked over a magnificent view of the water. Yachts and cruisers bobbed at anchor. Seagulls floated in serene peace. Cormorants dived for fish. Scobie kept his back to it all.

'Do you know the story about the morgue?' he asked.

'Not sure,' said Plant. Was this going to be some sort of

dirty joke?

'Where they were stealing dead men's shoes? The bodies would come in and they'd go through their pockets and take their money and their shoes and their teeth. Reminds me. Just a sec.'

He disappeared out of the room.

'That's better,' he said, returning still barefooted but with his mouth full of teeth.

'New set,' he said.

Plant looked at them unbelievably, the horror welling up in his throat like vomit.

'That's not where you - ?' he began. He had to ask. 'You didn't get them there?'

'Should have done,' Scobie said, tossing the pills into his mouth. 'Paid a fortune for this set. No.' He shook his head, the pills rattling from side to side against his shining molars. 'No, the shoes and teeth just gave me an idea. Take it further. Always take it further. Take it as far as you can and beyond. Advice,' he said, 'you want advice, that's my advice.'

'And the new novel?' Plant asked.

'Body parts.'

'Body parts?'

'Where do you think they come from?' Scobie asked.

'Never thought of it,' said Plant.

'Think now,' said Scobie. 'Somebody needs a new heart, a new kidney, another eye. Some company needs pituitary glands for hormones. Where do they get them from?'

'The third world, I suppose,' said Plant.

'Think how many parts they need,' said Scobie. 'All those operations. Every day. All the ones they drop and damage too.'

'It doesn't bear thinking of,' said Plant.

'Yes it does,' said Scobie. 'I'm thinking of it. It's big business. That's my new novel. *Body Parts*. How's that for a title? Lots of bite? Full of guts?'

'Yes,' said Plant.

'It's got everything,' said Scobie. 'Heart, soul, grief, sex, mutilation, vivisection, baby farms, cannibalism. It's a ripper. A body ripper.'

He reached for the bottle of pills and shook out a couple more, swilling them down with the coffee, starting the day again.

'So how do you find out all the material?'

'Research assistant,' said Scobie.

'Research assistant?' said Plant.

Scobie nodded his head, either in enthusiastic agreement or to dislodge the pills stuck somewhere in his gullet.

'They do the research for you,' said Scobie. 'Elmore Leonard has one. Gets all the street stuff right. All the violence. Russell Banks has one. John Hawkes had one. She was a smasher. Michener had a dozen.'

'A dozen.'

'At least,' said Scobie. 'Everyone has them. All the big names. You're nobody without a research assistant. You want to write about an Armenian. You don't know anything about Armenians. So you get a research assistant. "Find an Armenian," you say. "Go and talk to it, find out how Armenians talk, get it right. Go to the Armenian Cultural Centre." Bet you don't know where that is. You get them to find it out. Neutral Bay. You need to know these things. Authenticity,' he said. 'That's what it's all about.'

'So Fullalove was - ?' How could he put it?

'Digging up the data,' said Scobie. 'The newspaper story gave me the skeleton. Fullalove was helping flesh it out.'

There were the sounds of the front door opening and closing. Scobie turned his head towards it, widening his lips into a seraphic smile, as if for papal benediction or presidential jism.

'That'll be Claudia,' he said. 'Hello darling.'

'Hello darling,' she said, leaning over to give him a public kiss.

She deposited a stack of mail on the table and took a pack of cigarettes from her bag.

'Hello,' said Plant, politely.

'He brought Fullalove here last night,' said Scobie.

'I know,' said Claudia lighting up. 'Odious little shit.'

Plant blinked cautiously.

'Not you,' she said dismissively, wafting the smoke away from her in Plant's direction.

'No, he's all right,' said Scobie, 'he likes my books, he's a good one.'

'Everyone likes your books, darling,' said Claudia.

'That's true,' agreed Scobie.

'How is Fullalove?' asked Plant.

'He's fine,' she said. 'Just superficial. A few scratches.'

'They were working him over pretty methodically,' said Plant.

'How?' asked Scobie.

'Oh, you know, systematically.'

'I don't know,' said Scobie. 'That's why I'm asking. That's why I have a research assistant. To tell me these things.'

'Well, they were thumping him. There were two of them.'

'But what do you mean methodically?' Scobie persisted.

'Did they start at the top and work down? Did they take it in turns? I want to know what sort of method. Did one knee him in the groin and punch him in the stomach and then the other slam his face against a wall and kick him in the kidneys?'

'Darling,' said Claudia, 'not over breakfast.'

'What breakfast?' said Scobie. 'I don't see any breakfast. I haven't had breakfast yet.'

'I'll make some toast,' said Claudia.

'You know how you make toast?' said Scobie.

Plant shook his head.

'First you buy a farm, plant some wheat, then you water it, nurture it, tend it, reap it, winnow it, mill it into flour. Then you bake it into bread. Then you toast it. That's the sort of detail you need as a writer. You've got to be precise. You can't just say you'll make toast, people want to know how you'll make it. You can't just say they worked Fullalove over methodically, you've got to say what method. And show it. Remember Henry James. That's what readers want. Detail. That's why I employ research assistants.'

'Well you'll have to employ another one,' said Claudia. 'That little shit's packed it in.'

'Packed it in?'

'He phoned up. He's coming to collect his things and that's it.'

'What things?' asked Scobie.

'How do I know what things?'

'I didn't know he had any things. I thought he was against things. He said they were materialist.'

'Boring little worm,' said Claudia. 'He was getting far too political. Scobie never wanted him to get political.'

'No,' said Scobie.

'He got carried away,' said Claudia.

'On a stretcher,' said Scobie.

'Well, we don't have to worry about him or his things anymore.'

'I never worry about him,' said Scobie. 'As long as he does the work.'

'He's refused to do it any more so you can start worrying about that,' said Claudia. 'At least this way we don't have to give him notice and pay him a week's wages.'

'He said last night we owe him for three weeks,' said Scobie.

'Well, that's his problem,' said Claudia. 'He can whistle for them.'

'Not now all his teeth have been knocked out. You can't whistle when you've got no teeth. Listen.'

He took out his teeth and blew soundlessly through his pursed lips.

'Detail,' he said. 'That's the key to fiction. Getting the detail right.'

He put his teeth on the pile of mail and poured himself some more coffee.

'When I started writing it was like being a tutor at university,' said Scobie. 'Part-time work. Low pay. So I figured I had to move up the scale to the next position. I got a fellowship. Same as a lecturer's salary. Then I got a senior fellowship. Three years. Senior lecturer. Tenure. You have to be professional about these things. You have to have a benchmark. University was my benchmark. You have to have professional parity. Sabbatical. Why shouldn't I have a sabbatical? Go to Yaddo. Bellagio. Hawthornden. Professional parity.'

'You deserve it, darling,' said Claudia. 'Why shouldn't you have it?'

'Have what?' said Scobie.

'All of it,' said Claudia.

'Why not?' said Scobie. 'These academics do themselves well. Conferences, sabbaticals, gowns, high tables, honorary degrees. You've got to keep up. You've got to make sure you don't miss out on these things.'

'It's a status society,' said Claudia.

'That's right,' said Scobie. 'A status society.'

'And novelists should be at the top,' she said.

'We are,' said Scobie. 'We are at the pinnacle. The nation's treasures. The Ark of the Covenant. We are their stars. They need us to look up to.'

He pushed his teeth to one side and began to pick up the mail, looking at the envelopes without opening them.

'Who's going to see to all this now if Fullalove has gone?' he said.

'We'll replace him,' said Claudia.

'That's an idea,' he said. 'With a secretary. I'll get a girl. One of those blondes.'

'We are not getting a girl,' said Claudia.

'No,' agreed Scobie, 'we are not getting a girl.'

'How could you send a girl out researching? See what they did to Fullalove.'

'I thought you said it was only superficial,' said Scobie. 'Anyway a girl would probably have done better. She would just have offered to sleep with them. That's how you get information. A girl would be much better.'

'We are not getting a girl.'

'No,' agreed Scobie, 'I never thought we would.'

'How much do you pay?' asked Plant.
 'For a girl?' said Scobie. 'I haven't paid for one for years. The advantage of being a novelist is you get them for free. Like being an academic. Goes with the job.'

'For a research assistant,' said Plant.

'I don't know,' said Scobie. 'I leave all that to Claudia. She does all the accounts. Claudia,' he called, 'what do we pay for a research assistant? Not much,' he added confidentially to Plant. 'They come cheap. Like girls.'

Claudia came over with toast.

'What do we pay for a research assistant?' Scobie asked again.

'I know, I heard,' she said.

'What then?' asked Scobie.

'The going rate,' she said. 'Breakfast?' she asked Plant.

'Well -'

She doled him out a slice anyway.

'How much?' Scobie persisted.

'I'd have to look it up,' said Claudia. 'Why?'

'Why?' asked Scobie. 'Why?' he asked Plant.

'Just wondering,' said Plant.

'You want a job, is that it?' said Scobie.

'Could do,' said Plant.

'You've got to be tough,' said Scobie. 'Prepared for anything. Look at Fullalove.'

'I did,' said Plant.

'He couldn't take it. No moral fibre.'

'He did get knocked around.'

'It doesn't usually happen,' said Claudia.

'Got to expect it,' said Scobie.

'Shut up, Scobie,' said Claudia. 'It never happened before.'

He was obviously going about it the wrong way.'

'What happened to the one before?' said Scobie.

'Nothing,' said Claudia.

Scobie reached across for the pill bottle.

'How many have you had today?' she asked.

'Can't remember,' said Scobie. 'None. I've only just got up. I haven't even had one yet.'

He shook out a single pill.

'Take a half,' she said.

'You can't take a half.'

She split it for him and put half back in the bottle. He took a half.

Claudia lit a cigarette and disappeared upstairs.

Plant ate his toast.

'So how long have you been using them?' Plant asked.

Scobie looked at the bottle reflectively, turning it round in the light, holding it up to the window and the water and the sky and the whole expensive harbour view. He tapped out the half pill for good measure.

'I don't know. Ages, I guess,' he said. 'I used to make model airplanes. Sniff the glue, you remember? But they don't like you buying boxes of glue these days. Pills are a lot easier to get. You just phone up the doctor.'

'No, I meant research assistants.'

'Research assistants?'

'How long have you been using them?'

'Oh, that's easy,' said Scobie. 'Since they accused me of plagiarism. They set on me. Like a pack of dogs. Like the hounds of hell. Said I'd stolen all this stuff. That was a nightmare. Sold a lot of books though. Got me on the front pages. I never looked back after that. It's a funny country, you

know. It must be the convict settlement. Once they accuse you of some dreadful thing in the papers you've made it. It's like you've got to have committed a crime to become a successful Australian. Behind every great fortune lies a great crime. Like Claudia's Dad. They gave him a knighthood. That's what you have to do to get a knighthood. Rip people off. Stand over them. Kill them.'

Outside the expensive yachts bobbed at their moorings. Wealth and crime exuded their success, cabin windows flashing brief bursts of sunlight across the water as the wash of sinister powerboats gently tickled the hulls.

'The papers really went for me. Some dead hand of a professor had found some old book he said I'd used. Not just the weekend papers either. There was a piece in one of those academic journals. That really put me on the map. Got me in the bibliographies. And then there was this seminar on plagiarism. Can you imagine? I wouldn't have gone but my publishers made me. It'll sell books, they said. It'll sell at least seventy-five. If you don't go we'll pulp them. So I went. And the poet Prickett was on the panel too and we started talking. "You're mad," he said. "If you're going to copy out stuff, give it a footnote. That's what academics do," he said. "Then the people you've copied get flattered. You've referred to them. It makes them think they're important. Makes them think they exist. Helps their citation index. They put it in their CVs." He was a professor in his spare time, that's how he knew these things.

'What I'd been doing was changing it round a bit, you know, make it look different, but this dead hand of a professor had spotted it. Or his research assistant spotted it. They all have research assistants to do this stuff for them. They always spot

it. They don't have any ideas of their own so when anyone writes anything with an idea they assume it's stolen from somewhere and they spend all their time trying to track it down. Or get their research assistants to. It's what they do with their students. "Anyway, what you do," Prickett said, "is make sure you've copied it down exactly, that's the important thing, and put it in quotation marks and put the reference in a footnote."

"You can't do that in a novel," I said.

"Yes you can," he said, "it'll be post-modern."

"You reckon?" I said.

"Well, if you don't like that," he said, "you put a list of sources at the back. And then you send signed copies to everyone you quoted from, thanking them for their help, butter them up, you know."

"It's the acknowledgements and the bibliography that are the important thing," he told me. I never thought of it. "They're the first thing people turn to," he told me. "To see if their names are there. And spelled right. They're really the most important part of the book. So the crucial thing you've got to do is to check them through really carefully. Make sure no one's left out." I make it a feature now. Three pages at the end of the book. Everyone who ever helped. And some who didn't. Anyone whose book you used. Airlines. Car-hire companies. Restaurateurs. United Nations. Then you send a signed copy to all of them. With a special note of thanks. The prime minister. The ex-prime minister. The leader of the opposition. Commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Chair of the Australia Council. They love it. A personalized note. "Without your help blah blah blah." Ingratiation. That's the name of the game, ingratiating. Works like a charm.

'It's a hassle. It takes ages to get right. That's where he gave me the idea of research assistants. "But how do I know what I ripped off?" I said. "I read all this stuff, how do I remember which stuff I used?"'

"You get research assistants," Prickett said. "They remember it for you. They get the books from the libraries and keep a list of what you used and put all the acknowledgements in at the end. And what's more," he said, "when you run out of ideas you use theirs."

"Isn't that plagiarism?" I said.

"No," he said, "it's established institutional practice. It's totally legitimate. All the big professors," he said, "on all those committees, judging all those literary prizes, travelling round the world all the time being important, when do you think they have the time to think or write anything? They don't, do they? It stands to reason. So they hire research assistants to think for them. They write all their articles for them. Like politicians. Politicians don't write their own speeches."

"Don't they?" I said.

"Of course they don't," he said. "They get people like you to write them. That's what you should be doing. You can make a fortune writing speeches for politicians. Then you hire research assistants to write your novels. It's all a matter of economic priorities. Politicians don't write their own speeches. Academics don't write their own articles. Why should novelists write their own novels or poets their own poems? The best ones don't, not the successful ones."

"So that's where I got the idea. I got a research assistant and I've never looked back.'

"So you do that?" said Plant.

"Of course," said Scobie. "Do what?"

'Write politicians' speeches.'

'It's a good one,' said Scobie. 'Reconciliation, national identity, border security, asylum seekers, internment without trial, monarchism, republicanism. There's always something. You just have to make it sound good. Sonorous. Doesn't matter what you say. They change it all anyway. Put in a few negatives, or take a few out. But they keep the sonorousness. That's what they like. Sound and fury, signifying nothing. And it's not just the pay. That's good. You'd never believe how good. Better than writing novels. But it's not just the pay. It's the pay-offs. You get put on committees. Like those professors. Then you get sitting fees. Business-class travel. And medals. They give you medals. Service to the community, they call it. They like their speech-writers to have medals, makes them look more important.'

'Medals?'

'You know, brass things with ribbons, letters after your name, the order of this and that.'

'And what happened about the plagiarism?' asked Plant.

'Oh, nothing,' said Scobie. 'I said I was drunk and that was all right. There was this Oxbridge don who was accused of sexual harassment and they were all out to get him but he said he was drunk at the time. So they let him off and made him a professor. So I did the same.'

'And did they make you a professor?' Plant asked.

'Yes,' said Scobie. 'In America. But that came later. First of all they gave me a senior fellowship. I said all the financial stress and pressure of work and deadlines had driven me to drink and bad decisions, so they fixed me up with a five-year fellowship. That's when I started hiring research assistants. They're tax deductible. The fellowship was putting me in

the top tax bracket so I had to do something to minimize it anyway.'

Outside in the darkening night the flying foxes emerged from the Moreton Bay fig trees and began to circle over Snails Bay.

'Well,' said Claudia, coming back into the room, 'are you taking the job?'

So Plant became research assistant to the National Treasure. The literary life. The violence he was not so happy about. Deeply antipathetic to it, in fact. But he figured he would be able to side step it. Keep his researches to the newspaper files rather than going out on the street. No one went out on the street any more. Certainly not the people who read books. Let alone those who wrote them. If people read what went on out on the street they wouldn't believe it. They would reject it as unbelievable. Made up. Fiction. What went on out on the street was what newspapers and television and movies said went on out on the street. You wouldn't want to depart from that. Not if you were a modern realist. Or a post-modern one.

Chapter 3

Plant copied down Fullalove's phone number from the address book in the rubble on Scobie's kitchen table and gave him a call. He expressed solicitude.

'How's your face?'

'How do you think my fucking face is?' said Fullalove.
'Beaten to a fucking pulp.'

'I've got a couple of books of yours you left at Scobie's.'

'They can stay there,' said Fullalove. 'Fucked if I'm going out there again.'

'I can bring them over.'

'No,' said Fullalove. 'The place is a pigsty. Girlfriend walked out on me. Couldn't bear looking at my bruises. How's that for sensitivity?'

'Meet you somewhere for a drink,' said Plant.

'Somewhere dark where I can't be seen,' said Fullalove.

The beautiful city, the outdoor cafés, the reaches of the harbour, the ocean views, the sun sparkling on the gentle waves, thought Plant. And we have to go somewhere dark. Is this the literary life? Yes, this was the literary life.

They sat in the back bar of the Coogee Bay Hotel. Outside Plant knew that young women in bikinis and sarongs walked

along the pavements, licking ice-blocks and sucking soft drinks. Across the road he knew they lay on the sand and took off their bikini tops. He knew the sun throbbed, the surf pounded. But none of it was visible to him. He sat in the back of the pub and Fullalove poured out his accumulated bile. But bile was what Plant had come for, it would be hypocritical to complain, how could he complain? Easily, but he wouldn't.

'My life was fucked by multinationals,' said Fullalove. 'I was on track to be a junior media executive, I was being trained, I was editing papers, I was due for a mobile phone and a Saab convertible, then the multinationals took over and fucked me.'

He leaned forward confidentially.

'If I told you what they did to me you'd never believe it,' he said. 'I've conquered cancer and schizophrenia by the power of meditation. They drove me mad. They tried to kill me. I did this story on this person who cures by meditation. I went in there sceptical. But it works. I was sick for seven years. But I came back from the grave.'

He leaned across further. Plant felt himself backing away, tipping his chair back, leaning back further and further as Fullalove loomed in.

'They had me followed,' he said. 'They did terrible things to me. I can't get a job anywhere. Last year I applied for a hundred and twenty-three jobs and I didn't get a single interview.'

'So that's why you were working for Scobie?' said Plant.

He was being the systematic researcher, following up on detail. First thing you do is open up a file on your boss. And Fullalove was happy to talk. Perhaps it eased the pain. The

worst of the bruising had gone, only traces of purple and blue in an otherwise yellow and green discolouration of the face.

'Why else would I work for that little git? I was on track to be a junior media executive, I was being trained, I was editing papers, I was due for a mobile phone and a Saab convertible and then the multinationals took over and fucked my life.'

'So how did you meet Scobie?'

'I didn't,' said Fullalove.

'So how did you get to work for him?'

'I was desperate,' said Fullalove. 'My life was fucked by multinationals. I was blacklisted. I applied for a hundred and twenty-three jobs and I didn't get a single interview. There was this advertisement for a research assistant. I'm good on research. That's why they fucked me over. I knew too much.'

'So Scobie interviewed you?'

'Scobie?' said Fullalove. 'Scobie couldn't interview a pig's arse. No, it was Claudia. Claudia did the interview, Claudia calls the shots, Claudia runs the show.'

'So what's her angle?' asked Plant.

'She's got her artist,' said Fullalove. 'That's what she wants. Now she can queen it over her old private school mates. "I've got a writer." All those rich bitches competing.'

'Like charity work.'

'Like charity work my fucking arse,' said Fullalove. 'Charity. You must be fucking joking. Charity begins at home is her motto. Keep it in the family.'

'So what's her interest?'

'It's an investment,' said Fullalove. 'Money. Status. She thinks it gives her status, having a novelist. But money, there

has to be money in it. She wouldn't fuck a poet. No money in poetry. No, Scobie's her investment and he's got to deliver. She's like all these rich bitches.'

'Is she rich?'

'Rich? She's loaded. Father's a millionaire. Multimillionaire. Multinational multimillionaire. The people who fucked my life. Did I tell you - ?'

'Yes,' said Scobie. 'So why does she need money?'

'She doesn't,' said Fullalove. 'Not in the ordinary human sense of need. But the rich always want more. It's all she knows, money. It's the only way she measures anything. Status is money. Writing is money or it's not writing.'

'So does Scobie make much?'

Fullalove laughed derisively.

'He gets the grants. He doesn't sell.'

'Doesn't he?'

'Of course not. Who would read that shit?'

'I thought he was a best-seller.'

'He probably is. Doesn't mean anything though.'

'He's on the best-seller lists.'

'Not any more he isn't.'

'Really?'

'He used to be before they introduced BookScan. But you can't fake it any more. Now the sales records are all computerized and they know how many copies any book sells. And let me tell you, it's not many of Scobie's. It never was. They used to fake it and compile the lists from how many copies the shops had bought in. Didn't mean they sold them. They sent them all back at the end of the month.'

'Then what did they do with them?'

'Claudia bought them.'

'What for?'

'To save them from being pulped. Save them from being turned into egg cartons and turning all the eggs bad. Not that she cares about the eggs going bad. But that's why she never buys eggs. Refuses to buy them. People think Claudia's making a protest about the cruel way they keep battery hens. But she's not. It's because of the pulped books. She can't bear the thought of Scobie's books being pulped and turned into egg cartons so she buys them back at fifty cents a copy. She spends all day on the phone haggling them down from two dollars or whatever they start off at. But you can never be sure some haven't already been sold off for pulp.'

'What does she do with them when she's bought them?'

'Have you had a look in their cellar?'

'Not really.'

'What do they need a cellar for? Apart from burying the bodies of Scobie's girlfriends he was hiding from Claudia? You think he's a wine connoisseur? You should take a look in there. Chock full of the master's words.'

'So what do they do with them?'

'She gets him to inscribe copies to famous people and they mail them out. She sits there going through *Vogue* and *Who's Who* and *Who* picking out names. "Darling, did you send one to Tony Blair and George Bush? Just write a little note in the front. Something personal, darling." So Scobie puts in his teeth and pops another couple of pills and does what he's told. There's not a titled family in all Europe that hasn't received a signed Scobie Spruce first edition with a personalized inscription.'

'It must cost in postage.'

'All knocked off against tax,' said Fullalove. 'Every little detail recorded. Every stamp they buy she gets a receipt.'

'I wouldn't have thought Scobie was that organized.'

'He isn't. That's why she doesn't let him out of the house.'

'Is that so?'

'She's got her artist and she's not going to let it escape.'

'Doesn't he mind?'

'Scobie?' Fullalove laughed again and winced at the pain it caused him. 'Scobie likes it that way. Makes things easier. Everything's all mapped out. No confusing choices. No decisions. "Just pop another pill darling and write another thousand words."

'Doesn't it affect his writing?'

'What?'

'Being locked up like that.'

'No, why should it? It's all made up. He never wrote about anything anyway. It's just words. He's not one of your seeing the object as it really is writers. He's your classic post-modernist. Just reshuffles what's been done before.'

'And he's happy like that?'

'He'd say anything,' said Fullalove. 'Though he's shrewd, too. He knows what not to say. That's how he got successful. He knows what to keep away from. He might seem like he doesn't have a political idea in his head. But you've got to know your politics to avoid the political as consistently as he does. That's why they love him.'

'Who?'

'The pollies.'

'The police?'

'Them too, probably. Specially special branch. The ones who fucked my life. I was – '

'Not the police, then,' said Plant hurriedly.

'The police? No, the politicians. And the Australia Council. They can send him anywhere and he'll blather on blandly and never say anything. Whatever you say, say nothing. And at length.'

'So why do they keep publishing him if he doesn't sell?' asked Plant.

'The fucking multinationals,' said Fullalove. 'They've got to publish something. They're making so much money from the educational market and the imports. Most of what they sell is imports. But that looks bad. The politicians don't like it because people complain. Writers complain. So they have to publish some local writer to make it look like they care. So they publish people like Scobie who don't say anything. Then they hype up the publicity to make it look like he's big and they fill the shops with piles of his shit, window displays, dump bins at the front counter, then after a month they pulp them all. Or Claudia buys them back. But she's not going to tell anyone that. Nor are the publishers. They all pretend he's a bestseller. Then when someone else comes along who's saying something, like a real writer, in the old-fashioned sense, they don't sell, the publishers make sure they don't sell. Then they can say, "Too bad, sport, you don't sell like Scobie Spruce, we can't do your next book." That way they keep things under control. It's all about control. You make it look like you're publishing. You only publish crap like Scobie. The loss you make on him you set off against the obscene profits you're making on the imports and on the futures market and currency speculations, and everything's kept under control.'

'And does Scobie know all this?'

'Ah,' said Fullalove, 'that's the book that would be interesting. *What Scobie Knows*. It's impossible to tell. Maybe he doesn't want to. Maybe he doesn't care. Maybe it suits him like it is. It's a good life. Better than working. He gets to meet the rich and famous. Travels round the world business class. Gets his photograph in the papers. What more does he want? As long as the pills don't run out he'll be fine.'

'But he has to write.'

'Oh yes, he has to write. He's like those academics they hire as stars in America. He has to deliver. Though not that much. He delivers enough. As much as they want. They don't want that much. That's how the Americans came to hire him. Scobie delivers.'

'And that's the catch,' said Plant.

'I don't think he sees it as a catch,' said Fullalove. 'He just burbles on and out it comes. He'd be burbling on anyway. Frontal lobe epilepsy. Like Dostoevsky and Philip Dick, only without the quality. Can't help himself. He doesn't have a very developed reality principle, you may have noticed. He spends his life making up reality from the time he comes to in the afternoon till the time he passes out around dawn. Lies, excuses, fictions, political speeches, what's the difference? It's all words. He just hangs the tape-recorder round his neck, and burble burble, off he goes. What else has he got to do? He never goes out. Claudia's got him under lock and key. He could play patience all day or do crossword puzzles. He might as well write.'

'But if he never goes out,' said Plant, 'how does he get to know what to write about?'

'His publishers send him lists,' said Fullalove. 'His publisher decides "Here's an idea, this will sell, or might

sell, or will look as if it will sell, anyhow, here's an idea, who could write this, Scobie, he hasn't put anything in for eight months, we'll get him to do it." So they send him these projects. "We think a novel on space emigration would be a goer. We need a novel on an oil spill for the year after next." It saves him from having to think. And since it was their idea the publishers are committed to it. They're always more committed if they think it's their own idea. They don't like people sending in ideas off the street. Makes them uneasy. Too much talent and intelligence out there, it threatens them.'

'But what would Scobie know about space emigration or oil spills?'

'Nothing,' said Fullalove. 'That's the beauty of it. He's the *tabula rasa*. The blank sheet. No prejudices. No preoccupations. No agenda. Uncontaminated with thought or beliefs or principles or values. Totally value free. The man for our times.'

'But he needs to know something.'

'Not really. That's why he uses research assistants. To do all the leg work. "Go down to the library and run through the literature on space emigration. Read through some science fiction and digest the plots. Photocopy some articles in *Scientific American*. Highlight the interesting bits."

'And he reads it all?'

'He reads some of it. You read some of it to him. Or tell him about it. He's too bombed most of the time. But it all goes in. He flops there popping pills and leaving half-drunk cups of coffee and half-smoked cigarettes all round the house. And you follow him round gathering up the cups and stubbing out the cigarettes and you keep on telling him what you've found out and it sinks in. And Claudia does her entertaining

bit. She finds some space scientists somewhere, looks through the Celebrity Guides or phones up the university media service and US Consulate General and the British Council for names, and invites them out for dinner. And they all get pissed and she sucks it out of them, she's good at the adoring gaze and the "How fascinating," "Simply marvellous," "What an absolutely brilliant idea" stuff. And Scobie does his "Yes, yes, yes" number. And there you are. Another novel. Another piece of crap for the papers. He moves quickly. The secret is to move quickly so you never have time to think and see the problems. And never stop to read what you've written, that would be too awful. Just write something else.'

They went out into the bright sunlight, Fullalove blinking in pain. Amidst the waves the surfies rose and fell. An oil tanker moved along the line of the horizon. The young women in bikinis and sarongs still passed up and down the street and lay on the beach and took off their tops. Plant turned his back on it all and set off for work.

'One last thing,' Fullalove called out.

Plant turned round.

'So who're you working for?'

'Scobie.'

'Yeah, sure. But apart from that.'

'Apart from that?'

'So who's checking him out?'

'Why would anyone be checking him out?'

'Search me,' said Fullalove. 'I didn't ask why, I asked who.'

'No one,' said Plant.

'You were following me that night they did me over.'

'Not at all.'

'Sitting there fucking watching.'

'Pure chance.'

Fullalove gave a croak that might have been a laugh, one of the hollow variety.

'Suit yourself,' he said. 'Forget I even asked.'

Chapter 4

When Plant arrived for work at about four-thirty in the afternoon, the time he judged it safe to waken Scobie and Claudia from their chemical narcosis, there was a parcel on the doorstep. Not an especially enticing parcel, not your gift-wrapped tied in expensive tape and mounted with a bow in the shape of a flower type parcel. But a soggy, amorphous lump of something wrapped in newspaper, newspaper stained from whatever was inside.

Claudia came to the door, not especially gift-wrapped herself, clad in some comparably newsprinted designer robe that proclaimed *L'Unitá* or *Le Matin* or something, no doubt very expensive when bought in Paris or Rome decades ago.

'There's a parcel,' said Plant.

She bent to pick it up, robe, hair, cigarette ash dispersing in every direction.

'Wonder what it is,' she said. She unwrapped it on the kitchen table.

'What is it, darling?' asked Scobie, shuffling across from the sink.

'Must be the butcher,' she said.

Plant looked across. He gagged.

'Heart and kidneys,' she said.

'Sounds good,' said Scobie. 'When did you get them?'

'I didn't. They were on the doorstep.'

'Put them in the fridge so they don't go off,' said Scobie.

She sniffed them. 'They're all right,' she said. She sniffed again. 'I'll just wash them in salt water,' she said. 'That always works.'

'I didn't know the butcher delivered,' said Scobie.

'No,' said Claudia, 'isn't that good. We can just phone up. Saves going out.'

'When did you order them?' Scobie asked.

'I don't remember that I did.'

'You must remember.'

'No I don't.'

'You're taking too many of my pills,' said Scobie. 'You should lay off them.'

'Maybe it's a gift,' said Claudia. 'Maybe it's under new management. Mummy said they always used to do that. To good customers.'

'We're not good customers,' said Scobie.

'We certainly are.'

'We never pay them.'

'If you don't pay them they keep on giving you credit because they want to get what you already owe them. Of course we're good customers. They need our business. They couldn't afford not to supply us.'

'Because we owe them so much.'

'Yes,' said Claudia.

'Funny there's no note,' said Scobie.

She lifted the heart and kidneys out of their newspaper.

'There isn't,' she said.

'Maybe they're poisoned,' said Scobie. 'Try one on the cat just to be sure.'

'Puss, Puss, Puss,' Claudia called.

The phone rang and Claudia answered it.

'He's writing,' she said. 'He can't be disturbed.'

Scobie drew on a cigarette seraphically.

'They said this will disturb you then,' she said. 'They said next time it will be your body parts.'

'Who said?'

She put down the receiver. 'They rang off. They didn't leave a name.'

'What did they sound like?'

'I don't know. Just a voice.'

'Sinister?' said Scobie. 'Did they sound sinister?'

'There was only one of them,' she said.

'A man or a woman?'

'A man. He just sounded ordinary. Australian.'

'Maybe we shouldn't eat it,' said Scobie, looking at the opened parcel.

'There's nothing wrong with it,' Claudia said. 'It smells fresh.'

'All the same I think it's meant as a warning,' said Scobie.

'Well, you've been warned,' Claudia said. 'We've still got to eat.'

'Not human hearts,' said Scobie. 'It might be Fullalove's.'

'I'll give it the cat then,' said Claudia. She went off calling 'Puss, Puss, Puss.'

But Puss Puss knew a thing or two as cats do, and kept well away.

'I'd take it as a warning,' Plant suggested.

'Could be,' Scobie agreed.

'It's what they do.'

'Is it?' said Scobie. 'I could use that. Put it in the novel. *Verité*. Authenticity. It's always good to have a *verité* touch. That's why I used Fullalove. Get the gritty realism.'

'It could be risky,' said Plant.

'Why's that?'

'If it was meant as a warning, they're not going to appreciate reading about it in the novel. They're not going to appreciate reading the novel, anyway, for that matter.'

'It'll be pretty full on,' said Scobie.

'And they know your address,' said Plant. 'They might come for you next time.'

'You reckon?'

'If beating up your research assistant didn't stop you.'

'I don't like that,' said Scobie.

'It wouldn't be pleasant,' said Plant.

Scobie poured himself a coffee and swilled down a pill.

'Want one?' he asked Plant.

Plant shook his head.

'You reckon they'll come for me?'

'Now they know Fullalove was working for you, yes, probably. They know your address, they know where to come.'

'You know,' said Scobie, 'I'm not sure that body parts is a goer.'

'It might put readers off,' agreed Plant.

'Yeah, it would,' said Scobie, 'it would put readers off. People don't want to read about that sort of thing.'

'I don't think I would,' said Plant. Let alone research it. But he wasn't sure enough of Scobie to say that. Scobie might

be perverse enough to send him off again down the mean streets Fullalove had trodden. He had no wish for that. No desire to be pulped so soon. Not at all. Strictly a desk job. It was a matter of cautious fencing, encouraging agreement as Scobie shuffled his way through the rubble on the kitchen table, fiddling with his pill bottle, wondering whether to take another one or two more.

'Pity,' said Scobie. 'There's all that research. Pity to waste it.'

'Especially if it's completed,' Plant hazarded. 'Maybe you could adapt it.'

'Adapt it?' said Scobie. 'How could you adapt it? Use a kidney instead of a heart?' He mused. 'Might work,' he said. 'Like *The Island of Dr Moreau*. Only sicker.'

'Maybe you could keep all the medical setting, just change the details. Make it a malpractice suit.'

'Too boring,' said Scobie. 'Too everyday. Happens all the time. We need something with some bite.'

'A doctor with AIDS? Falls in love with a patient?'

'Yeah, sex,' said Scobie. 'Sex is a start.'

'I think it's got a wider appeal than body parts.'

'Private parts,' said Scobie. 'That's it. We can still have a penis graft. How about someone cuts off his penis? I've got all that research on tissue rejection. Don't want to waste that.'

'If it's his own penis sewn back on it wouldn't be rejected,' said Plant.

'We'll make it someone else's,' said Scobie. 'This woman. She goes round cutting off penises. And they sew the wrong ones back on. Tissue rejection. Great title. *Tissue Rejection*.'

'Why does she cut them off?'

'She cuts off her husband's because he's screwing someone

else. Then she goes to see the doctor who's sewing it back on and tries to screw him for revenge on her husband. But he can't get it up because he's a junkie doctor. He's spaced out on pethidine or morphine or something. So she cuts his off too. Neat?'

'Surgically precise,' said Plant.

'Then I can still use all the operating theatre stuff,' said Scobie. 'I've got all that roughed out. Instead of putting in a new heart, they're sewing on a prick. Two pricks. And they mix them up. And they get rejected. So they have to buy more.'

'Sounds good to me,' said Plant.

'But wouldn't he know it wasn't his own that he was sewing back on?' said Scobie.

'I would think so.'

'Then we're fucked.'

'I don't think he'd be sewing his own back on himself,' said Plant.

'Pity,' said Scobie. 'It would make a great scene. Especially for a telemovie.'

'It would be another doctor doing it, surely,' said Plant.

'You reckon?'

'I would think so.'

'Ripper,' said Scobie. 'Then we're in like Flynn. No problems. What you've got to do is go down to the library and get all that stuff on that case where that woman cut off her husband's prick. Get all the details. Check the medical press. You never know, there's probably some interesting angles there. Get me photocopies of it all. *Verité*. It will give it *verité*. It's always good to have *verité*.'

'No problem,' said Plant.

It was no problem at all. The problem had been solved. The problem had been the risk of getting beaten up like Fullalove. And he had no doubt that Fullalove would offer his, Plant's, name to anyone who might ask. But now, with Scobie diverted from the trade in body parts, life seemed sweet. A few days in the calm of the State Library looking up old newspapers, popping out to the Domain for a smoke, or a stroll around the Botanic Gardens, what could be sweeter? He could suit himself on the time he spent there, go and come when he felt like it, load up the hours on the assumption Claudia would try and find ways of cutting them down anyway, and read about the severed penis in a gentle glow of THC and the free-floating erotic immanence that seemed always to envelop libraries, or at least his perception of them. Yes, he reflected, how sweet it was.

Scobie cut in on his reflections.

'Maybe they sew on a Chinese prick. Maybe there's a trade in penises from the Far East.'

'Leave it alone, if you want my advice,' said Plant. 'You don't want those thugs getting ideas. If they read about that in your novel they might come at you with a machete.'

'You reckon?'

'Almost certainly,' said Plant.

'They might too,' said Scobie. 'I suppose.'

'Or send some sexy little chick to visit with a razor blade in her cunt,' said Plant.

'That would make a good scene too.'

'No.'

'No?'

'No. Leave it alone.'

Scobie opened his bottle and shook out a couple of pills.

'So we leave that then?' he said.

'Absolutely,' said Plant.

'It would've made a great cover. A box of pricks. Packed in ice. Like the fish markets.'

'The shops wouldn't stock it,' said Plant. 'It would never get in the windows.'

'Pity though,' said Scobie. 'Are you sure? It's not cunts. It's not like it's sexist.'

Chapter 5

As the day began its sad decline Plant set off for work. The traffic built up, on the bridge the lanes had been changed and now more led out of the city than in, the petrochemical pollution climbed back up to its toxic levels, the fruit bats began to chatter in their trees and make preliminary circling sorties.

The hours suited him. They would leave him the day for doing whatever he liked doing best. It was going to be all right, he could see that, he was going to make sure it was all right. He rolled a supply of joints. Just in case. His trusty weapon. It rarely failed. Get them relaxed, get them talking, get them grateful. But use with caution. He hadn't figured Scobie and Claudia out fully. Popping pills was one thing. They could obviously persuade themselves pills were medicine. Prescription drugs. But they mightn't appreciate him taking a bag of grass out and rolling up a number on the kitchen table. So he rolled a batch up before he went and stuffed them in his sock, lit up one for the road as he sat there, no point in arriving too soon, they wouldn't be up, he'd be standing out on the step hammering on the door.

They hadn't got very far with the day's creation. Claudia

was brewing up coffee. Scobie was sitting at the table counting out how many pills he had left. Plant sat opposite him and looked at the view. It would be nice to have a view like that. It would be nice to have a boat out there. It would be nice to have the money to afford either, or both. He was still in reverie mode when the doorbell rang again. Somebody else who knew the household's timetable. Claudia went to the door. Scobie slipped himself a couple of pills and started counting again.

'I thought you'd finished,' Claudia said.
 'I have.'
 'So what do you want?'
 'I came to get my things.'
 'What things?'
 'A sweater. A couple of books. Say goodbye.'
 'We've said goodbye,' said Claudia.
 'Is that Fullalove?' said Scobie.
 'Yes,' said Fullalove.
 'What's he want?'
 'He's come to get his things.'
 'What things? I thought he didn't have things.'
 'My fucking sweater,' said Fullalove.
 'Come and get it then,' said Scobie.
 'We're frightfully busy,' said Claudia.
 'I'm not stopping,' said Fullalove.
 'You look terrible,' said Scobie.
 'I got beaten up, didn't I?'

'It looks like it,' said Scobie.
 'It looks disgusting,' said Claudia.
 'You're all bruises,' said Scobie. 'Does it hurt?'
 'Course it fucking hurts.'

'Have a pill,' said Scobie, offering the bottle.
 'No thanks,' said Fullalove. 'I hate those things. They knock you stupid. I don't know how you keep going on them.'
 'Practice,' said Scobie. 'Years of practice. And discipline.'
 'Give me a smoke any day,' said Fullalove.
 Scobie pushed across a pack of cigarettes.
 'Not that sort.'
 'You want mentholated or something?'
 'I meant dope,' said Fullalove.
 Plant waited. Tentatively. You could never be sure.
 'That would be nice,' said Claudia. 'Why do we never get dope any more?'
 'Because you refused to pay the price,' said Scobie. 'You said it was too expensive.'
 'I don't even know what it costs.'
 'Same as an ounce of gold,' said Fullalove. 'It's always the same. On the news every night.'
 'The price of dope?' said Scobie.
 'The price of gold,' said Fullalove. 'And that's the price they go by. Never varies.'
 'Amazing,' said Scobie. 'Where's my notebook? Might use that.'
 'Big business,' said Fullalove. 'Fucking multinationals. Multinationals fucked my life –'
 'You want a smoke?' said Plant, cutting across as fast as he could. He reached down to his sock beneath the cover of the table, no point in letting people know anything they didn't need to know. He passed a joint across to Claudia and lit it for her. She sat on it for half a dozen drags before handing it on to Fullalove, reluctantly.
 Scobie passed.

'Don't need it,' he said. 'Natural apomorphines.'
 'It makes him paranoid,' said Claudia.
 'And what about you?' said Scobie.
 'It reminds me of the seventies,' she said. 'When I was in England. With the Brewinglords and the Fauxmonnayeurs. We were stoned all the time. We ate mushrooms. We dropped acid together. We literally flew down Mayfair.'
 'In your Maidenform bra,' muttered Scobie.
 'We burned our bras. These were the sixties.'
 'I thought you said it was the seventies.'
 'Sixties, seventies, what's the difference?'
 'Ten years,' said Fullalove.
 'It was my youth,' said Claudia. 'Next to Paris in the twenties I wouldn't have lived at any other time.'
 'Were you in Paris too?' said Scobie. 'Tell me about Hemingway.'
 'It was a revolution,' said Claudia. 'Acid and Oz magazine and *The Female Eunuch* and Glastonbury and folk festivals and the Beatles and the Stones. It was like one incredible party.'
 'Especially in Vietnam,' said Fullalove.
 'Yes, Vietnam too,' said Claudia. 'We protested. We marched. We sang "We shall overcome".'
 'You and Lady Brewinglord and the Marchioness of Fauxmonnayeur.'
 'They were really revolutionary,' said Claudia. 'They were revolutionary as only the aristocracy can ever be. They had none of that working-class conservatism that made the Labour party so boring.'
 'Popinjay Trotskyites,' said Fullalove.
 'We were Maoists,' said Claudia.
 'In hand-made silk Mao suits and beads and bangles.'

'I loved the beads and bangles,' said Claudia. 'They shone in the sun. They scintillated and –'

'Jangled,' said Scobie.

'Like tambourines,' said Claudia. 'And the crystals. They cast these beautiful prisms of light. We did all that boring physics stuff at school. But this was the first time I really saw the spectrum. Really saw it, you know. Knew it.'

'Through John Lennon's granny glasses.'

'Yes,' she said.

'Blowing soap bubbles in the wind.'

'Yes,' she said.

Plant passed her a fresh joint and she took a long drag on it.

'Yes.'

A drag of reminiscent delight, a long, slow, exhalation.

'It was a revolution,' said Claudia. 'And Australians were in the front of it.'

'Bullshit,' said Scobie, 'you weren't even in Australia.'

'So where were you?'

'I wasn't even born,' said Scobie.

'Liar,' said Claudia.

'At least I was in Australia,' said Scobie. 'At home in the heart of the convict settlement.'

'While you sat around at home,' said Claudia, 'we travelled the world. We brought them the women's movement. We brought them *Oz* magazine.'

'Who's them?' said Scobie.

'The English, of course.'

'The English upper-class,' said Fullalove.

'They were the only class liberated enough to understand,' said Claudia.

'Understand what?' said Scobie.

'The American way of life,' said Fullalove.

He sucked on a joint, wincing with pain as the smoke ran across his broken teeth, the paper sticking to his bruised and swollen lips.

'It was all a CIA operation,' said Fullalove, irritated. 'They knew the Brits would never accept it from America. Europeans are too anti-American. Like Asians. Like everyone except Australians. So they got the Australians to do their dirty work for them. Same as in Chile.'

'We were anti-American,' said Claudia. 'We marched on Grosvenor Square.'

'And dropped acid and smoked dope and got wiped out.'

'You're smoking dope,' said Claudia.

'Can't deny it,' agreed Fullalove.

'So what's wrong with dope?'

'*Le kif détruit le corps et l'esprit*,' said Fullalove. 'You start getting too political, too radical, they introduce dope to the scene and hose it down. The sixties were getting too radical. All the baby boom generation opposing the war in Vietnam and supporting the Cuban revolution and demanding an end to racial segregation in the American south and marching against the bomb.'

'We marched against the bomb,' said Claudia.

'A couple of times,' said Fullalove. 'Till it got boring, darling. Then they introduced dope and acid and everyone got spaced out and couldn't get it together to do anything any more. Much more fun.'

'There were still protests,' said Claudia. 'The women's movement.'

'The women's movement was designed to divide the left

into two factions. Men and women. Halve its effectiveness and set the two halves against each other.'

'The left was so patriarchal,' said Claudia.

'There you go,' said Fullalove. 'Unlike Lord Brewninglord and the Marquis de Fauxmonnayeuer.'

'Their children all rebelled.'

'If rebelling consists of sticking needles in their arms and screwing rock musicians.'

'You can't say the entire sixties was a CIA plot,' said Claudia.

'I can,' said Fullalove. 'And I do. And it was. And the seventies too.'

'And the eighties and nineties,' offered Scobie.

'I'm not saying everyone was conscious,' said Fullalove.
'Not all of them.'

'Conscious?' said Scobie.

'Most of them were too out of it to be conscious of anything.'

Scobie nodded in amiable agreement.

'Not that it mattered whether they were or not. The point is the scene was being run. The agenda was in place. So you recruit your feminists, hippies, dope propagandists, Harvard professors, cosmopolitan paedophiles, you smooth their path, get your multinational publishers in place, your underground print shops, your finance, your media whores, and roll them out. Maybe they never knew who they were doing it for. Maybe they did. The point is they did it. Seemed like a good idea at the time. All the gates opened. Magical mystery tours. It just all worked out.'

Claudia turned her back on him. Scobie shuffled off to his record collection. Plant fished another joint out of his sock.

Scobie dug out LPs of Dylan, Cohen, Joan Baez, the Beach Boys, bearing them to the table, showering them across the books and newspapers and letters and coffee cups already there.

'Lovely darling,' said Claudia. 'But they're all LPs.'

'I know,' said Scobie. 'I know what an LP is.'

'But the record player doesn't work.'

'Doesn't it?'

'It hasn't worked for years.'

'Why don't we get it fixed then?'

'Because we only play CDs.'

'Is that so?' said Scobie. 'Then we're missing out on all this.'

'Mind-fucking,' said Fullalove.

'Dylan wasn't mind-fucking,' said Scobie.

'He just took Woody Guthrie's protest music and depolitized it. Sounded like it was in the radical tradition but when you listened to what he was saying it was never clear what he was saying. Said whatever you wanted it to say. Perfect. In the end it said nothing. Except everybody must get stoned. The company song.'

'It was inspirational,' said Claudia.

'Like the Pied Piper,' said Fullalove. 'It was a children's crusade and you all followed and never came back.'

'I came back,' said Claudia.

'Maybe you never went away,' said Fullalove.

'Fuck you,' said Claudia. 'I'll show you where I went.'

She stormed out of the room.

'Now you've done it,' said Scobie. 'Now it'll be photo time. You'll be lucky if it isn't a slide show. You ought to know by now not to provoke her.'

He shook out a couple of pills in preparation.

Claudia came back with her *recherches du temps perdu*. *Souvenirs d'autres temps*. Many a backward glance. Volume upon volume of heavy photo albums. Sarongs. Bare breasts. Indian prints. Here at Ginsberg's feet. There laying hands on Burroughs' rifle. Here exchanging smiles with Timothy Leary. There with the Marchioness de Fauxmonnayeuse. Here with Lady Brewington. Love-ins. Smoke-ins. Country inns. Pheasant shooting. Rock concerts. Parties. Parties. Rock concerts. Moments of protest. More parties. More rock concerts. More Lords and Ladies. Long purples. Deep purple. Purple lined passions of sweet sin. There she was. Inserted into the historical record. Part of the cultural design. Daddy's wealth, Mummy's drive, time on her hands.

Fullalove had one last go.

'It was just the way the CIA cut the multinational drug barons in,' he said.

'You're just embittered,' said Claudia. 'You missed out on everything and now you feel resentful.'

'I didn't miss out on anything.'

'I never saw you,' said Claudia.

'You were too stoned,' said Scobie.

'I saw what was happening,' said Fullalove. 'The fucked generation. The generation that fucked itself. Playing at revolution by running around in body paint and getting stoned on the drugs the government supplied.'

'You're just paranoid,' said Claudia.

'He fell through the doors of perception,' said Scobie. 'He's just another victim of the sixties like you, darling.'

'I'm not a victim,' said Claudia.

'I am,' said Fullalove. 'My life was fucked by multinationals.'

I've been poisoned and blacklisted and persecuted and harassed.'

'Driven mad,' said Claudia.

'They infected me with schizophrenia,' said Fullalove, 'but I recovered by meditation.'

Plant reached into his sock.

'You're just a paranoid relic of the seventies,' said Claudia. 'You just smoked too much dope and can't handle it.'

'At least I fucking smoked it,' said Fullalove. 'I wasn't prancing around in chiffon getting myself fucked by relics of the minor aristocracy.'

'They weren't minor,' said Claudia.

'They're just social deviants,' said Fullalove.

'Fuck off,' said Claudia.

'Rich bitches playing at revolution.'

'Fuck off.'

'Dancing on the faces of the third world and grinding them into the mud.'

'Just get your moth-eaten sweater and go, you horrid little man,' said Claudia. 'Plant, take him away. I won't have him here any longer. Get him his sweater and show him the door.'

'I'm not one of your hereditarily brain-damaged upper-class,' said Fullalove. 'I don't have to be shown where the door is.'

'Just go through it, then,' said Claudia. 'Plant, get him out of here.'

'No problem,' said Fullalove. 'Delighted to go.'

'See you, Fullalove,' said Scobie.

'I hope not,' said Fullalove.

Plant went with him to the front door.

'Thanks for the smoke, mate,' said Fullalove.

'One for the road,' said Plant, slipping him one last number.

'Be in touch,' said Fullalove.

Chapter 6

'I come from a long line of artists,' said Claudia.

'Chorus girls and tap-dancers,' said Scobie.

'They were not tap-dancers.'

'Floozies to the Emperor Rudolf,' said Scobie.

'Mummy trained as a painter.'

'Like Hitler,' said Scobie.

'They were not at all like Hitler. They were all from very good families.'

'Land-grabbers and peasant-fuckers,' said Scobie.

'They were refined and cultured people.'

'They had baths in the blood of a thousand virgins,' said Scobie.

'Literary people,' said Claudia. 'Poets. Essayists.'

'No novelists, though,' said Scobie. 'Where are the novelists?'

'Novels were thought rather vulgar, darling.'

'They borrowed them from their *au pair* girls,' said Scobie.

'Exactly,' said Claudia. 'That's the sort of remark only a novelist would make. Novelists were always held to be poor form.'

'Poor but honest,' said Scobie.

'What would you know about honesty?' asked Claudia.
'More than your family of slave-drivers and rack-renters,' said Scobie.

'They always supported the arts,' said Claudia. 'They owned publishing houses, they donated public statues.'

'Of themselves.'

'They were patrons of festivals. They knew all the great names. Anaïs Nin, Josephine Baker, Vivian Leigh, Picasso, Klimt, Oscar Wilde, they all used to come and stay.'

'They were in the hotel business,' Scobie said.

'I remember when I was a baby –'

'Pissing in Henry James' lap.'

'Henry Miller,' said Claudia.

'Henry Ford,' said Scobie.

'It's in our bones,' said Claudia.

'Pissing in people's laps,' said Scobie.

'Art,' said Claudia. 'Culture. Literature.'

'Pissing in people's pockets,' said Scobie.

'When I went to Europe,' said Claudia, 'the first thing I wanted to do –'

'Was get laid,' said Scobie.

'Was to find creative people.'

'To get laid,' said Scobie.

'London was simply amazing. All that music. All that theatre. The poetry readings. The pop festivals. I thought, if only we could have that here.'

'We did,' said Scobie. 'It was great. You and all your rich friends were out of the country. It was the best time we ever had.'

'The Isle of Wight,' she said. 'The Round House. The Albert Hall.'

'Then you all came back and tried to take it over and fucked it.'

'What we have to do,' Claudia said, 'is build a living culture here. Foster the arts. Set standards.'

'Have parties,' said Scobie. 'Get pissed.'

'So that's what we're doing,' Claudia said, beaming at Plant.

He nodded wisely.

'It's terrible Daddy's title isn't hereditary.'

'Why?' said Scobie.

'Because then you'd have been a lord.'

'No I wouldn't.'

'A knight, then.'

'No I wouldn't,' said Scobie.

'If I was a lady you would have been a lord.'

'It doesn't work like that.'

'Well, we'd have petitioned the Queen.'

'He'd have had to have played more poker games,' said Scobie.

'Daddy never played poker. He wouldn't have known how to play.'

'Didn't need to. Better he didn't. He just had to lose five games at seven grand each to the Premier.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The price of a knighthood when he got his,' said Scobie.

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Claudia. 'Where did you get that idea from?'

'It's in my novel.'

'Which novel?'

'How can I remember which novel?' said Scobie. 'What does it matter?'

'Who told you?'

'Everyone knew.'

'So why put it in a novel if everyone knew?' said Claudia.

'It must have been my first novel,' said Scobie. 'Before I met you and became sophisticated.'

'You've certainly improved,' conceded Claudia. 'It's just such a pity you can't inherit Daddy's title. It would look so much better on the book jackets.'

'It would have to be on the title page,' said Scobie. 'That's where you put your titles.'

'Yes,' said Claudia.

'Except nobody ever uses their title on a novel,' said Scobie. 'Apart from Lord R'Hoone. You never see "Another book by Lord Bragg." Or "Lord Archer's latest." "More from Sir Malcolm." "Sir Kingsley's last words."

'I think they should,' said Claudia. 'It would look so much better.'

'Scobie, Baron Spruce,' said Plant.

'Don't you start,' said Scobie.

'We should take Plant to meet Daddy,' said Claudia. 'He expects us.'

'And what Daddy expects he gets,' said Scobie.

'He's worked hard for it,' said Claudia.

'He still does,' said Scobie. 'He works everyone hard. He never stops. The inhuman face of capital.'

'He wants to meet Plant.'

'Why?'

'He wants to meet our new research assistant.'

'How does he know we've got a new one?' said Scobie.

'Daddy knows everything,' said Claudia.

Scobie made muttering noises.

'What did you say?' asked Claudia.

He turned to her, a hand clapped to his mouth with a pill in it.

'Just swallowing, darling,' he said.

Daddy was on his back in his swimming pool, floating on an inflatable mattress.

'Where's the bimbos?' asked Scobie. 'Where's the water nymphs to hand you your drinks?'

'I can get my own drinks,' said Daddy. He paddled the li-lo to the poolside and reached out for a glass to prove it.

'Daddy is a self-made man,' said Claudia.

'Obviously,' said Scobie. 'No divine creator could have come up with something like him.'

'This is Plant, Daddy,' said Claudia.

Daddy raised an arm in salutation.

'Good evening, Mr. Plant.'

'He's helping Scobie on the new book.'

'Can't he do it himself?' said Daddy. 'Why's he need help?'

'Plant's a research assistant.'

'Research assistant,' said Daddy. 'I thought Scobie was supposed to be a novelist. Why does he need a research assistant? What is there to research?'

'All sorts of things,' said Claudia.

'What do you research, Mr. Plant?' Daddy asked.

'Oh, library materials, newspaper records, technical details.'

'Can't Scobie do that? What does he do all day? What do you do all day, Scobie?'

'Sleep,' said Scobie.

'Sleep?'

'Most of it,' said Scobie.

'He works at night, Daddy,' said Claudia. 'It's quieter then.'

'Why doesn't he wear ear-muffs and work in the day?' said Daddy.

'That's a good one,' said Scobie. 'I hadn't thought of that.'

'You can't write with ear-muffs on,' said Claudia.

'Don't see why not,' said Daddy.

'They'd block out the inspiration. Besides they'd look ridiculous.'

'You have a problem with noise?' Daddy asked.

'Yes,' said Scobie. 'All writers do.'

'How many writers have a problem with noise?'

'Eighty per cent,' said Scobie.

'Eighty per cent,' said Daddy. 'So we market a line of ear-muffs for writers. Scobie can endorse them. I'll give him a percentage. What could you sell them for? Fifty dollars? Seventy-five?'

'Something like that.'

'What do you mean, something like that?' said Daddy. 'It's one or the other. There's a big difference.'

'You could have two lines,' said Plant. 'The cheaper one for the poets.'

'Now there's someone who's thinking,' said Daddy. 'See, you've just got to put your mind to it. Why don't you think commercially about your writing, Scobie?'

'I do,' said Scobie.

'Why aren't you successful, then?'

'He is,' said Claudia.

'Real success,' said Daddy. 'Like English novelists. Writing

detective series for television. That's success.'

'Scobie's novels are art,' said Claudia.

'How many have you written this year?'

'Daddy,' said Claudia, 'you don't write novels like that.'

'Why not?' Daddy asked.

'The publishers don't like it,' said Scobie. 'They hate it if you write too many.'

'Get another publisher.'

'They're all the same.'

'Then use another name. How do you think I made my money?'

'Honestly?' suggested Scobie.

'Of course it was honest,' said Daddy. 'Anything that makes money is honest. Do you think I just shut down the factory when a store said we've got enough? Of course I didn't. I started another line. You don't just shut down and wait till they're ready to buy more. You keep on producing. You find new markets. You use a different package. If the publishers have enough Scobie Spruce you think of a new name.'

'Interesting concept,' said Scobie. 'What sort of a name?'

'I don't know what name,' Daddy roared, beating the water around him into a white rage. 'You're the writer. You're supposed to know about names. You've got a research assistant, get him to research a name.'

Scobie stepped back from the edge of the pool, brushing the spray from his shirt. 'What sort of name, Plant?' he asked.

'Depends on the product,' said Plant. 'Would they be similar books or a cheaper line? A home brand sort of thing?'

'There you are,' said Daddy. 'He's thinking. That's how you should be thinking. Do a cheaper brand. Like home brand cat-foods. Half the price. Why can't publishers do that?'

'I don't know,' said Scobie.

'Well, find out why,' said Daddy. 'Don't just lie around sleeping all day saying you don't know. You need some marketing wisdom. There's no point just making things. Any fool can make things. You've got to know how to sell them.'

'In bookshops,' said Scobie.

'And do they sell?'

'Sometimes,' said Scobie.

'Not good enough,' said Daddy. 'They have to sell all of the times. Bookshops are useless. Who goes into bookshops?'

'People who want books,' said Scobie.

'Exactly. Useless. You've got to get them to people who don't want books. Get a new market. A big market. A real market. All those people who never read books. How do you reach them?'

'You tell me,' said Scobie.

'Premium offers,' said Daddy. 'You write a book you can do premium offers with. You put in gizmos.'

'Gizmos,' said Scobie.

'Exactly,' said Daddy. 'You write in little things you can make plastic models of. Furry characters. Little furry animals. Spaceships. Crazy cars. Everyone loves to collect them. Cost nothing to make. Extruded plastic. Put them in breakfast cereals. Then people buy your books.'

'You reckon,' said Scobie.

'Doesn't matter if they don't,' said Daddy. 'You've sold the premium offer. Think how many people that will reach. Breakfast cereals. Fast food chains. Millions a day worldwide. Think about it, Scobie.'

'I will,' said Scobie. He took out his pill bottle.

'No more of this literary nonsense. Invent some real

characters. Ones you can recognize.'

'In extruded plastic.'

'That's the idea. Nothing complex. Recognizable features. Low cost. Then you've got a winner.'

'Any other ideas?' said Scobie. 'Always glad to have them. Can always put them in a novel.'

'Cover versions,' said Daddy.

'Go on.'

'Like the record industry. Somebody does a song. Then somebody does another version. Why can't you do that?'

'What, cut a record?' said Scobie. 'I always wanted to be a rock and roll singer.'

'No, not a stupid record,' said Daddy, flailing through the pool to pour himself another drink. 'Take some classic novel and do a cover version of it. Why wouldn't that work?'

'What, write out *Don Quixote* again in my own handwriting?' said Scobie.

'Scobie Spruce tells *War and Peace*,' said Plant, 'that sort of thing?'

'Perfect,' said Daddy. 'And that other book. The sex one.'

'*Fanny Hill*,' said Plant.

'*Tropic of Cancer*,' said Scobie.

'*The Story of O*,' said Claudia.

'*Venus in Furs*,' said Plant.

'*Les Liaisons Dangereuses*,' said Claudia.

'All of them,' said Daddy. 'You could do all of them. All of them.'

His swimming trunks began to distend. He rubbed his genitals affectionately.

'Why don't you do that, Scobie?' he asked. 'That would be writing.'

He dipped off the mattress and splashed around the pool.

'I'll think about it,' said Scobie.

'Think about it?' Daddy spluttered. 'That's like all you intellectuals. Work, sex, money, you'll think about it. Just do it, Scobie.'

'Which?' Scobie asked.

'All of it,' said Daddy.

Scobie turned to Plant. 'Remember that,' he said. 'Make a note, will you. What we've got to do. All of it.'

'Claudie,' said Daddy, 'go and tell Magdalena we're coming soon.'

'The *au pair*,' said Scobie to Plant.

'This new novel,' said Daddy, as soon as Claudia had gone. 'What's it about?'

'Well,' said Scobie, 'originally –'

'No,' said Daddy, 'don't tell me, I don't want to know, I never heard. But I hear things, Scobie. My associates, you know, they tell me things. They tell me there's some writer in town was getting into tricky areas. You know? Areas you wouldn't want to get into. Not good for art. Not good for health. Not good for anything much except trouble. There's a lot of money involved. These associates, they don't like things that make them lose money. And I agree with them, Scobie, they're my associates after all, I don't like to lose money. Maybe it's someone you know. Maybe you should tell them.'

'I'm not writing that one any more,' said Scobie.

'I'm glad to hear it,' said Daddy. 'Scobie, I'm very glad to hear it. And your research assistant?'

'I fired him.'

'Very wise move,' said Daddy.

'Plant's replaced him.'

'Excellent, Mr. Plant,' said Daddy.

He smiled at them from the pool and they smiled back, long, fixed smiles.

'Daddy,' Claudia called out. It was her outrage voice. It penetrated even underwater.

Daddy turned and swam to his drinks before surfacing. He took a swig from his glass.

'How can you do this?' she said.

'Easily. What?'

'Hang a painting over a swimming pool.'

'Didn't you see it before?'

'No, I certainly didn't.'

'It looks good, heh?' he said. 'Artistic. Self-referential. One of Scobie's words. He told me about his self-referential novel so when I saw this I thought, yes, a self-referential swimming pool.'

'But it's a David Hockney.'

'It better be a David Hockney. That's what they charged me for.'

'It must have cost a fortune,' said Claudia.

'Your fortune,' said Scobie, 'our fortune.'

'Now I am an old man,' said Daddy. 'Still fit, but old. Now I am rich. Not super rich but rich enough. I can indulge myself now. Now I can afford art. I can afford Scobie, I can afford paintings. But until I am rich I don't indulge myself. Now, Scobie, how rich are you?'

'But you'll ruin it,' said Claudia. 'You can't hang a painting by a swimming pool.'

'Why not?' said Daddy. 'It's an indoor pool.'

'But the damp will ruin it.'

'It's mine, isn't it?' said Daddy. 'I paid for it, didn't I?'

'Who knows?' said Scobie.

'It's vandalism,' said Claudia.

'I own it,' said Daddy. 'I can do what I like with what I own.'

I am not hired as a curator.'

'The sun will fade it.'

'He should've used better paint, then. Maybe I can get a rebate for faulty materials.'

'You shouldn't hang it where the sun can get to it.'

'So I should put it in the cellar?' said Daddy. 'I buy it to enjoy it. I lie here and look at it. I think, now I have a Hockney in my swimming pool, now I am happy. You want I should lock myself in a cellar like some old miser. I spent my time in the cellars, let me tell you. Now I am old and I will enjoy life. And art.'

He clambered out of the pool and lit himself a cigar.

'And the doctors, they can go to hell too.'

He stomped off.

'Magdalena,' he shouted.

The *au pair* came running with his bathrobe and wrapped him in it. They disappeared inside the house in their matching robes, Daddy in bare feet, Magdalena swaying on her high heels.

'Now see what you've done,' said Scobie. 'You've made him mad.'

'It's appalling,' said Claudia. 'I don't know how he can do it.'

'Why do you always have to make him mad?' said Scobie.

'He'll get over it.'

'You'll give him a heart attack.'

'Rubbish.'

'Then he'll die and we'll get all his money and the Hockney. Where would we hang it? We'd have to build a swimming pool.'

'Don't be disgusting,' said Claudia.

'What was disgusting?'

'We are not building a swimming pool,' said Claudia.

Daddy called out to them. They went through the billiard room. Plant stopped to admire the table. He knew that anything that glossy and gross was to be admired. The way to his host's heart.

'Nice table,' he said.

'You play?' said Daddy.

'Yes,' said Plant.

Shady poolrooms in the long afternoons, thin shafts of sunlight through the dust and cigarette smoke.

'We have a game now?'

'No,' said Claudia. 'I've come to see you. I'm not sitting around doing nothing while you play that idiotic game.'

'You should learn to play,' said Daddy.

'Ugh,' said Claudia.

'My daughter thinks it is vulgar,' said Daddy. 'She is the artistic one. She thinks a billiard room is a mark of the vulgar and nouveau rich. I say old rich, new rich, what does it matter as long as you're rich, it's all the same money.'

Plant nodded wisely, silently, wisely silent. But he ran the tips of his fingers along the expensive timber. A gesture to warm the owner's heart.

'You come round some time,' said Daddy. 'We'll have a game. When you're not too busy writing Scobie's novels for him. Scobie, he doesn't play either. He says he's no coordination.'

I say he's no balls. What do you reckon, Mr. Plant?"

The old man laughed evilly. It was like being poked in the ribs with a billiard cue.

Plant said nothing.

'You're a man of tact, heh? A man of discretion. I like that. You come round here and we'll play a game.'

Dinner was appalling.

'So how many books did you sell this week, Scobie?' Daddy asked.

He poured them all a sliver of wine and Magdalena served up something incomprehensible.

'No idea,' said Scobie.

'What do you mean, no idea? You must have some idea.'

'No I don't,' said Scobie.

'Don't you get sales figures from your publishers?'

'Every six months.'

'Every six months.'

'If you're lucky,' said Scobie.

'So how can you know what you're selling?'

'I told you I don't,' said Scobie. 'They tell you how many are sold in but they're not really sold. They're out on consignment. They're all on sale or return, so you sell two hundred one month and two months later two hundred could come back. More sometimes.'

'Not your books, Scobie,' said Claudia. 'Yours don't come back.'

'Everybody's come back,' said Scobie. 'They send them out to Woop Woop and Canberra and places where no one reads and then they all come back.'

'All of them?' said Daddy. 'They can't all come back. How

many come back?'

'Sixty per cent,' said Scobie.

'Sixty per cent?'

'Thirty to forty per cent if you're lucky,' said Scobie.

'How can you run a business like that?' said Daddy.

'Search me,' said Scobie. 'Not my business.'

'It is your business,' said Daddy.

'I just write the books,' said Scobie.

'That's what the stupid victims said in the war,' said Daddy.

'I am an intellectual, I am a writer, I am a musician, it's not my business. So they all got killed. Did I get killed? No. I survived. I made it my business. It's kill or be killed. You remember that, Scobie.'

'I will,' said Scobie.

'You go out there and kill or they'll come and kill you. Remember that.'

'How could I forget it?' said Scobie.

'Give me the name of your publisher. Maybe we should send somebody to visit him.'

'Daddy!' said Claudia.

'Returns are insane. In my business, you sell something, you sell it. Do you know how many bad debts I have? Less than one per cent. That is how you run a business. Mr. Plant, you're a research assistant, research me the directors of Scobie's publishers, you can do that?'

'I can do that,' said Plant.

'There you are,' said Daddy. 'At last, somebody can do something. Now we're in business.'

'Yes sir,' said Plant.

'And while you're at it find out Scobie's sales figures.'

'I could try,' said Plant. 'I could check out BookScan.'

'BookScam,' Scobie snorted. 'The figures don't mean anything, they're pathetic.'

'They must mean something.'

'Nothing,' said Scobie.

'Maybe they mean you're not selling,' said Daddy. 'So how much money are your books making now, Scobie?'

'Making?' said Scobie. He palmed out a couple of pills from his pill bottle.

'Daddy,' said Claudia. 'They're art.'

'So,' said Daddy. 'Art is money. That David Hockney is art. It cost me. That's how you know it's art. It costs you. If I'd gone out there and painted a picture of that pool it wouldn't be worth anything. It wouldn't be art. Art costs money. If it doesn't cost money it isn't art.'

'Literature's different,' said Claudia.

'Why's it different?' said Daddy. 'Everywhere I go I see books. Every airport they have a bookshop. Every suburb has a library. Somebody must be making money.'

'But not the writers, Daddy.'

'Why not?'

'Artists are poor. You know that. Garrets and things.'

'David Hockney isn't poor.'

'No, but –'

'So how much is Scobie worth now?'

'More dead than alive now she's got that insurance policy on me,' said Scobie.

'Could be,' said Daddy. 'If you told me how much your books are making we could do the sums.'

'You keep asking me that,' said Scobie.

'You keep not answering,' said Daddy. 'Don't think I don't notice.'

'It's not just the books,' said Scobie. 'I make as much from appearances as from the books.'

'Appearances? You some sort of conjurer now?'

'Literary related activities,' said Scobie. 'Talks. School visits. Festival appearances. Keynote addresses.'

'So give up writing books then,' said Daddy.

'You need to write the books to get the appearances,' said Claudia. 'They don't invite you if you don't write anything.'

'Don't you be so sure,' said Scobie. 'There's some literary figures haven't written anything for years still treading the circuit.'

'And there's the grants,' said Claudia.

'What grants?'

'Literary fellowships. You know that. You know Scobie's a Senior Fellow.'

'So who pays for them?'

'The government.'

'The government!' shouted Daddy. 'The government pays for nothing. The taxpayer pays. People like me pay.'

'You never pay tax,' said Claudia.

'I pay my accountant,' said Daddy. 'If I didn't pay my accountant a fortune I'd pay millions in tax. All to support idle dodgers like Scobie. Whose books don't even sell.'

'They sell a bit,' said Scobie. 'They sell as much as anybody else's. If they sold too many they wouldn't give me a grant.'

'If they sold enough you wouldn't need a grant.'

'You need a grant for the status,' said Claudia. 'If you don't have a grant you're nobody. Nobody takes you seriously.'

'It's like a license to run Lotto or a television station,' said Scobie. 'It shows the government loves you. It's a license to

print money.'

'Well start printing some,' said Daddy.

'Yes,' said Scobie, 'first thing tomorrow.'

'First thing tomorrow you'll be asleep,' said Daddy. 'You work at night so start tonight.'

Daddy prodded Plant as they left.

'Don't forget our game,' he said. 'Some afternoon,'

'After your sleep,' said the *au pair*. 'After four.'

'After our sleep,' said Daddy.

'Yes, sir,' said Plant. 'After four.'

It was like they were a whole family of vampires, only functioning as nightfall came on.

Chapter 7

Foreign Affairs showed up late one afternoon with a distinguished visitor.

'Pour the drinks, would you, Plant,' said Claudia.

'Not for me, madam,' said the visitor.

'These fellows don't touch alcohol,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'Against their religion or licensing laws or something.'

'Put the coffee on then,' said Claudia.

'No, not coffee, not for me, madam.'

'Tea?' asked Claudia at her hostessy best, unfazed.

'Tea would be acceptable,' said the visitor.

'Boil the kettle, Plant, would you,' Claudia ordered. 'Chinese or Indian?' she asked

'Not Chinese, please,' said the distinguished visitor. 'Not for a black bastard like me. No fear of the yellow peril with me.'

'Good one,' said Scobie. 'Have a pill. Opium.'

He offered the visitor the bottle. The visitor took out his glasses and read the label.

'Oh, synthetic. Thank you very much, sir, but not for me. Not synthetic opium. You come to my country and I will

arrange the real thing.'

'It's a deal,' said Scobie. 'Shake on it.'

They shook hands.

'Witty chaps, these literary types,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'Absolutely not, sir,' said the distinguished visitor.

'Deadly serious,' said Scobie.

'Indeed, sir.'

'Let me give you a book,' said Scobie. 'Two books.'

He had a stack lying in wait. He began to inscribe them.

'You have multiple copies, sir?' asked the visitor.

'You bet,' said Scobie.

'The reason I ask that is that I am setting up Australian Studies centres all over my country.'

'We're supporting him up to the hilt,' said the Foreign Affairs man. 'Priority project.'

'Fifteen centres, sir,' said the visitor. 'Just to begin with. Each with a library as yet unstocked. So if you have multiple copies, sir, we should be most grateful to receive them.'

'Plant,' called Scobie, 'bring up some boxes of books from the cellar.'

'Moreover,' said the visitor, 'each centre will have its own journal. And I am here to ask you to write for them. All of them.'

'What sort of thing?' asked Scobie.

'In each issue we will publish a new novel. Every time you have a new novel you give it to us and we shall publish it.'

'What do you pay?' asked Claudia.

'Oh, madam, forgive me, we are a very poor country, and your husband here is a very rich man.'

'I told him Scobie is our most successful novelist,' said the

Foreign Affairs man. 'Don't want to lose face on this sort of thing. Can't have them thinking all these literary types are beggars. Bad image.'

'You would have to talk to the publishers,' said Claudia. 'They control the rights to this sort of thing.'

'That presents no difficulties,' said the visitor. 'I am sure you can see to that. Your Australia Council will arrange it, I am sure. You tell them.'

'Yeah,' said Scobie, 'we'll tell them.'

'If you do not have a new novel we will publish your old novels,' said the visitor. 'You have a huge readership in my country.'

'Do I?' said Scobie.

'Undoubtedly,' said the distinguished visitor. 'Your novels should be much loved. You see, they are not available to us. So we will do you a special service. Your government gives us the money and we will publish all your old novels. Very ecological.'

'That's good,' said Claudia.

'One hundred per cent recycled paper. One hundred per cent recycled novels. I will organize a special conference. You will be the keynote speaker, sir. All the papers will be about your books. Every one a PhD thesis. Only the very best. Your publisher will publish the proceedings. It will be a deserved tribute to you, sir.'

'Sounds great,' said Scobie.

'No more synthetic opium,' said the distinguished visitor. 'You will come to my country and you will have the real thing. You will see. Beautiful country. You will have beautiful girls. You will write beautiful novels. How do you say it in Australia?'

'Beaut,' said Scobie. 'Beaut is how we say it in Australia.'

'Now we must commemorate this occasion,' said the visitor.

'We must have a commemorating photograph.'

'We don't have a camera,' said Scobie.

'Plant,' said Claudia, 'do you have a camera?'

'I have a camera,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'Ah, a spy camera,' said the distinguished visitor.

'Photograph us, then,' said Claudia. 'Commemorate the occasion.'

'The National Library will love this,' said Scobie.

'And the National Security Agency,' said the distinguished visitor.

The Foreign Affairs man lined them up, Claudia beaming in the centre, Scobie slipping a pill into his mouth, the distinguished visitor with his palms together in front of his face.

'You, too, sir,' said the distinguished visitor to the Foreign Affairs man. 'I will photograph you.'

'That's all right,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'He's being diplomatic,' said the distinguished visitor. 'But I insist.'

'Out of film,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'In my country,' the distinguished visitor told Scobie, 'we would have you painted in gold and silver. With diamonds for your teeth and gold thread for your hair. Naked boys and girls would lie at your feet. Incense would rise from censers. The heavens would rain down jewels. Flute music would serenade you.'

'Imagine giving that to the National Gallery,' said Scobie.

'And now,' said the distinguished visitor, 'we will each of us sing one of our native folk songs.'

Claudia led off with 'Waltzing Matilda'.

The Foreign Affairs man was looking anxiously at his watch.

'We have to leave,' he said.

'You've only just got here,' said Claudia.

'I know, I know, it's such a packed schedule.'

'Where've you got to go?' asked Claudia.

'It's all on the itinerary,' he said.

'Who are you seeing?' asked Claudia, louder, firmer.

'The driver has it written down,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'He's being diplomatic,' said Scobie.

'Who?' Claudia persisted, her suspicions deepening.

'Next,' said the distinguished visitor, 'we go to your brothel keeper. That is a visit to which I am very much looking forward. A very liberal attitude your Liberal government takes to these things.'

'Chap who wrote that memoir *Brothel Creepers*,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'Not Bayes!' said Claudia. 'You're not taking him there!'

'He will surely invite us to sample the pleasures of his house as a courtesy,' said the distinguished visitor.

'It's a book he wrote, it's not a facility,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'No problem,' said Scobie. 'Old Tusk. He'll arrange some girls for you. Or boys. Tell him I said he would.'

'Very jolly,' said the distinguished visitor.

'Are you meeting her too?' asked Scobie.

'We do have to go,' said the Foreign Affairs man, hustling the visitor before him to the door.

'Don't forget your books.' said Claudia.

'Oh, we can't carry all those,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'They're a gift,' said Scobie.

'Very generous,' said the distinguished visitor.

'Fifteen copies of five titles, plus five personally inscribed copies,' said Scobie.

'You'll have to mail them,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'It would cost a fortune,' said Claudia.

'Well, you can't expect us to send them.'

'Yes we can,' said Claudia. 'That's what you're there for. Use the diplomatic bag, Plant,' she called.

He was standing there, ready.

'Put them in a couple of boxes and carry them to the car.'

'There's no room,' said the Foreign Affairs man.

'Put them on the back seat,' Claudia instructed Plant. 'Don't let them put them in the boot. They'll forget them and throw them out.'

'I will make sure I take them,' said the distinguished visitor. 'I will keep them close to my heart. I shall read them on the flight back. Your government will generously pay the excess baggage, have no fear.'

'You'll love them,' said Claudia.

'Love them but not leave them,' said the distinguished visitor. 'And now to the whorehouse. Let us hope that it is not like your opium. Let us hope that this is, in the words of Henry James and the Coca-Cola Corporation, the real thing.'

'What a life,' said Scobie. 'Driving around town with overseas visitors. What a scam. I should have gone into Foreign Affairs. I should have been a spy.'

'But you are, darling,' said Claudia.

'No I'm not.'

'You told me you were.'

'No I didn't.'

'You said the secret service called on you for special missions. You said it was top secret and you couldn't say exactly what you did.'

'Spies never say they're spies.' said Scobie. 'Unless they're drunk and in bed with a beautiful woman.'

'You were, darling.'

'Who was I in bed with?' said Scobie.

'Me, of course, darling. Who else?'

'I refuse to confirm or deny,' said Scobie.

'Of course you would,' said Claudia. 'That's what they all say.'

'All?' said Scobie. 'How many others have you been to bed with?'

'Official Secrets Act, darling,' said Claudia.

'Prickett,' said Scobie. 'What did he say? That's why they gave him that seven-year grant. Paid him off for doing some dirty work.'

'You've had a seven-year grant too, darling,' said Claudia.

'So I should,' said Scobie.

'Of course you should,' she agreed.

'Tell me about Prickett,' said Scobie. 'What did he say? When he was drunk in bed.'

'I have nothing to say about Prickett,' said Claudia.

'What about the Beast, then?' said Scobie.

'Or the Beast.'

Plant felt himself feeling the beginnings of a surge of erotic interest in Claudia. Because others had shown interest, was that it? Surely not. But it seemed that way.

'They fix up the reviews for you if you've been a spy,' Scobie explained to Plant. 'Find you plots. Send you to interesting places. Like Graham Greene.'

'I'm sure you could still do it, darling,' said Claudia, 'if you're not already. Why don't you apply? I could speak to someone. Daddy knows all those people.'

'I bet he does.'

'They used to show him the security reports on me in the anti-war days.'

'I bet that turned him on,' said Scobie.

'I'll ask Daddy what he can do.'

'Ask him to fix up Plant while he's at it,' said Scobie. 'Then we can go spying together. How about it Plant, wouldn't you like to be a spy? I reckon you'd make a good one, what do you think, Claudia?'

Plant smiled uneasily.

'See,' said Scobie, 'he knows when to say nothing. He'd be great under interrogation.'

Chapter 8

Scobie sat surrounded by his papers. He had them in heaps all over the floor. He sat amongst them, his shirt tail out, his teeth out, his tongue out in enraptured concentration.

'Plant's come to help, darling,' said Claudia.

'Listen to this,' said Scobie. 'This is that bastard Bayes.'

It was a postcard from Tübingen: Tuscan Bayes on his tour of Europe. Sponsored by the Australia Council and Foreign Affairs. Promoting Australian Writing overseas. It was a delicate watercolour of a tower beside a river. 'This is where they locked up Hölderlin when he went mad. Thinking of you. Tusk.'

'Throw it away, darling, its offensive.'

'But it's Bayes,' said Scobie. 'He sold the National Library his papers. They collect him. This is the sort of thing they want.'

'It's unpleasant, darling.'

'He is. It's typical. That's why they bought his papers. So they can have some unpleasant writers to write about. That's what they want.'

'Throw it out, darling. We don't want to add to his papers. Why build up his reputation?'

'Good point,' said Scobie.

'It's insulting, darling.'

'He's always insulting.'

He held up the card again and looked at the picture.

'We could build a tower here,' he said. 'That would be neat.'

Why don't we build a tower?'

'Why would we build a tower? It would cost a fortune.'

'You've got to have a tower to show you're an artist. Like Yeats. Or poor old Brett. It would be a memorial. It could be a museum. It would be a feature for my museum. We could keep all the papers in there. And when I'm dead, people will come and consult them. Before I'm dead. Like a presidential library.'

'Then we wouldn't be able to sell them to the National Library.'

'That's all right,' said Scobie. 'We'd have them here.'

'Then we wouldn't get any money for them.'

'We could charge admission,' said Scobie.

He took another look at the card and ripped it in two.

'Now you won't be able to sell that,' Claudia said.

'You told me to throw it out.'

'But it's worth money.'

'I'll Sellotape it back together,' said Scobie. 'It will be worth more than that way. The biographers will have something to write about. "In an impassioned fit of anger he ripped in half an offensive card from the despicable Tuscan Bayes, a forgotten minor novelist."

'Short story writer,' said Claudia. 'He's not even a proper novelist.'

'Where's the Sellotape?' Scobie wailed.

Plant found it. Scobie carefully stuck the card back

together.

'That's what they like,' he said. 'The personal touch. The intimate detail. They don't want all these.'

He gestured across at the three drafts of his last novel, the working notes, the final print-out, the proofs.

'They pretend they do,' he said. 'They pretend it's all about literature. But it isn't. What they want is the dirt. They want your correspondence. Letters people sent to you. Copies of letters you sent back. It's all a hassle. Now I have to keep copies of everything. It's much easier now with photocopiers and computers. Before that, you had to use carbon paper. That was a real hassle. But it's still a fucking hassle.'

He looked at the card one more time.

'Maybe I should just black his name out.'

'Then they won't know who it's from,' said Claudia.

'That's the idea. Why should I memorialize him?'

'But the reason they'll buy it is because it is from him.'

'I could just put a line through his name,' said Scobie.

'What's it all for?' asked Plant.

'What's anything for?' said Scobie. 'What's life for?'

'This stuff,' said Plant.

'It's not stuff,' said Claudia. 'It's Scobie's papers. For the National Library archives.'

'They love it,' said Scobie. 'They can't get enough of it. They want everything. Correspondence. Diaries. Menus.'

'Menus?'

'Signed menus. I read about them somewhere. When all those boring old lost generation Americans used to meet in Paris they'd sign the menu. To show who was there and who ate what. Before they got lost. So I sign menus for them.'

'Pick some up, would you, Plant, next time you eat out?'

said Claudia. 'Doesn't matter from where. They like to think writers go slumming.'

'But they won't be signed by anyone,' said Plant.

'I can do that later,' said Scobie. 'Easy. I know everyone's signature. That's what they like. Menus. Bills. I give them bills. Claudia won't let me give them the receipts because she needs those for tax. But all that sort of stuff. It bulks it out. They pay by the inch.'

'The centimetre,' said Claudia.

'Yeah, the centimetre,' said Scobie. 'So the more you can give them the better. I have to copy things out. Make a few changes. Make it look like it's another draft. I copy out all the novels into longhand.'

'That must take ages.'

'It does,' said Scobie. 'Though I leave bits out. They like that. That way it looks like a first draft. You know, they think the other bits got added in later. Revisions. They like a longhand version. They're a bit worried about computers and what they're getting. But if you give them a first draft in longhand they think it's the real thing. Especially with crossings out and spelling mistakes. I'm good at them.'

'But you don't write in longhand.'

'Course not,' said Scobie, 'but they don't know that, do they?'

'So how long does it take?'

'I don't know,' said Scobie. 'I do it while I'm watching television. In between the advertisements. Days, weeks, months.'

'Is it worth it?'

'Ten grand, fifteen grand,' said Scobie. 'You have to sell a lot of novels to make fifteen grand. Even I have to sell a lot

of novels to make fifteen grand. And it's tax deductible. You don't sell the papers. You donate them. The library gets them valued and they give you a tax credit. When I started I used to sell them. I needed the ready cash then. And in those days they had lots of money. They were building up their collections. And I got them hooked. Now they've got to keep taking it all to keep their collection complete. They've invested in me so heavily they can't give up now. And the tax credit, that's really good now. They don't have any money to purchase with any more so they do it this way. It cuts my tax bill. If I sold them it would just give me a bigger tax bill.'

It was a slow process. The correspondence would send Scobie off into reverie, recall, reminiscence, rage, desperate recourse to the pill bottle. But it was a necessary culling. Claudia presided over it. Certain things had to be removed, certain evidences destroyed, certain offensive letters that hadn't been destroyed at the time had to be destroyed now, friends had become enemies and all traces of them had to be expunged, unless they were valuable enemies the library had invested in, and in that case there had to be discussion and a decision.

'We need pictures,' said Scobie. 'That's what they like. Visual aids. They don't really like literature. Libraries are like arts councils and universities. They hate writers. They loathe words. They would like to exterminate us. In fact they have done. They do. That's their mission in life.'

'So why do they buy all this?' asked Plant.

'To kill us with. To bury us alive. To destroy the novel beneath the dead weight of laundry bills and gossip and poison pen letters. We should burn it all. Refuse to give it to them. We could have a bonfire. If we can't have a tower at

least we could have a bonfire. One phallic symbol is as good as another.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Claudia.

'Well it is,' said Scobie. 'What's the difference between an aubergine, a banana, a fire, and a tower? Nothing.'

'We are not burning them,' said Claudia.

'Why not?' said Scobie. 'It's a great idea. Let's do it. Like Henry Lawson. Burn it all.'

'We need the money,' said Claudia.

'We could videotape the bonfire and sell that,' said Scobie.

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Claudia.

'I'm not ridiculous,' said Scobie. 'We don't need the money. You could spend some of your inheritance. You're loaded. Money's the last thing we need.'

'I can't spend it,' said Claudia. 'It's earning money.'

'Liberate it,' said Scobie. 'You used to be a revolutionary. Free it from the pains of labour.'

'It's in a trust fund.'

'That's what all the girls say,' said Scobie. 'It's in a trust fund. I've got my period. The children are coming home from school.'

'You need your papers in the National Library,' said Claudia. 'For people to work on you.'

'I've been worked over too many times,' said Scobie. 'I hate it. I want them to work on my books, not on me. It's a distraction.'

'It's for future biographers.'

'I don't want biographers. They just rake up things and turn people off you. People read about all the drugs you took and all the brothels you visited and all the women who fucked you

and that's it, they think they know all about you, they don't bother to read your books then, it kills your books.'

'It's for literary critics,' said Claudia. 'So they can write about your books.'

'That's just a slow death too,' said Scobie. 'They're so boring it puts everyone off altogether. Who did you ever hear of who went and bought a book because they read about it in some literary critic? I never did. I want a bonfire.'

'We're not having one,' said Claudia. 'You need that collection in the library. You can put an embargo on it so no one looks at it.'

'What use is that?' said Scobie. 'What's the point of having it there if no one can read it?'

'It shows you exist.'

'It shows I exist? Of course I exist.'

'You're up there with all the other manuscript collections.'

'What?' said Scobie. 'With Bayes and that lot? That's not existing. That's worse than cryogenics. That's being embalmed. That's the death of the author beyond the grave.'

He shook out a couple of pills to kick-start his heart and bring him back to life.

'Anyway,' he said again, 'we need pictures. They like pictures. We need some photographs.'

'I can take some,' offered Plant.

'We don't have a camera,' said Claudia.

'Buy one,' said Scobie.

'A good camera costs a lot of money.'

'Buy a bad one,' said Scobie. 'They'll prefer that. Looks more authentic. *Verité*.'

'They have to be good ones,' said Claudia.

'No they don't,' said Scobie. 'Tell you what. We could go to

one of those booths. The ones they have on stations.'

'When were you last at a station?' asked Claudia.

'When I ran away from home,' said Scobie. 'I bet they still have them. It'll be like *Scenes Along the Road*, all those old photographs of the Beats, they love that sort of thing, the documentary record they call it. We could go and visit Bayes and photograph him.'

'The idea is to photograph you,' said Claudia, 'not the opposition.'

'We could put our arms round each other like Kerouac and Cassady,' said Scobie. 'Chums. They'd like that. We could go and pick him up and take him to the station.'

'No,' said Claudia.

'It would be like old times,' said Scobie.

'No.'

'It would be.'

'It might be but we're not doing it.'

'We've got to photograph somebody,' said Scobie, 'otherwise they'll think I'm a freak. They'll think I don't have any friends. They'll think no one speaks to me. They'll think I'm locked up in this house all day without any visitors and I never go out. They'll think I'm like Howard Hughes or something. J. D. Salinger.'

'It's good publicity,' said Plant.

'That's true,' said Scobie. 'Or is it? Does it sell books?'

'That's what we could do,' said Claudia. 'Sell some books. Go down to Mac's and sell him some books. He'll have a camera. He's always taking photographs for his archives.'

'But he won't let us have them,' said Scobie. 'He takes them to sell them. That's how he makes his money. He sticks them in first editions and gets you to sign them.'

'We'll take him some first editions,' said Claudia.

'And we could go past the station on the way,' said Scobie.

'Go and get some books,' Claudia ordered him.

'Some rare first editions?' said Scobie.

'Yes.'

'How many? A box of each?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Claudia. 'He's got to think they're rare or he won't buy them.'

'One of each?' said Scobie.

'It's not worth the petrol just taking single copies,' said Claudia.

'Two?' said Scobie.

'Two of some, three of others,' said Claudia.

'Signed?' said Scobie.

'Sign them there,' said Claudia. 'He likes that. And we can photograph you signing them.'

'I'll get Plant to put them in the Wangler.'

'We'll go in my car.'

'Not in your clapped out old Vulva,' Scobie whined.

'Shut up and get them,' said Claudia.

'Central Station,' said Scobie.

'Why Central?' Claudia demanded.

'Because it's the cheapest place to take photographs,' said Scobie.

'How do you know?'

'I know these things,' said Scobie. 'The novelist's trade.'

'So Central Station it was.'

'Just mind the car, Plant,' said Claudia.

She refused to put money in a parking meter and Scobie

didn't have any, anyway, like the monarchy it wasn't something he carried.

'Just drive round the block or something if the parking police come,' said Claudia.

'I'll need the keys,' Plant called out.

But they'd gone.

They came back after twenty minutes with four strips of photographs, the two of them crammed into the booth, Claudia with her claws firmly gripping Scobie's shoulders like an arresting officer.

'Aren't they great?' said Scobie. 'They'll love these.'

They pulled up in Glebe a block away from Mac's shop. Scobie took out the books and his gold Parker ballpoint pen and downed a couple of pills. He plunged into the throes of creation, correcting misprints, emending phrases, adding in a few adjectives, and crossing out a few more.

'He likes that,' said Scobie. 'Author's corrections. Updates. Second thoughts. Last words. That's what the collectors go for. Something special no one else has got.'

He crossed out a line. 'Director's cut.'

'Don't cross out too many,' Claudia said.

'It's all right,' said Scobie. 'It's not like I'm cutting them out. They're still getting their money's worth. They're not going to be underweight. Claudia thinks they'll get the weights and measures police onto me. The office of fair-trading. Reminds her of her Dad.'

'It's not that,' she said. 'It looks like you don't know what you're doing. If you cross too much out it will look like you're confused.'

'But if I add things in it won't?'

'Just do it,' she said.

'Don't hurry me,' said Scobie. 'This is the important bit. This is the bit that has to be right.'

Claudia snorted.

'No,' said Scobie, 'it is. This is what decides him to put it in the catalogue. The whole point is to get a good entry in the catalogue. He sends out hundreds of them. A thousand probably. They go to collectors and libraries. Then they know you're the sort of author collectors collect.'

'Of course you are, darling.'

'But you've got to let them know. There's no point just having your books in every second-hand bookshop in town. That looks like no one wants them. Like people get rid of them. You want them hard to get. You want them so hard to get that when they get them they list them in their catalogues. They've got to be rare books. The last thing you want is hundreds of remaindered copies in all the book exchanges.'

'That's why we don't let them remainder them, darling,' said Claudia. 'That's why we always buy them up.'

Mac's bookshop was near the university. 'The Latin Quarter,' he called it. The street had sprouted cafés with rickety chairs and tables on the pavement. 'Like the Left Bank,' said Mac.

'Which bank's that?' said Scobie. 'The Bank of China?'

'Very droll,' said Mac.

He had the ingratiating, untrustworthy manner of a retired publisher or secret service agent. Remaindered now, but not above trading a bit of information. Not at all. The shop proclaimed Arber in gold lettering, with a couple of green trees each side of the name. Inside the shop the bays of shelves were neatly labelled. Occult. Curiosa. First Editions.

Travel. Theatre. Military History. It was all there, meticulously categorized. Benjamin Britten accompanied Peter Pears in the background.

'I've got some books for you,' said Scobie.

'Something rare?'

'First editions.'

'Signed?'

'Signed, corrected, revised, annotated,' said Scobie. 'The lot.'

'Not too messy, I hope,' said Mac.

'Mint condition.'

'I'm not sure they can be both in mint condition and authorially annotated,' said Mac.

'You'll get round it,' said Scobie.

He picked up a copy of Mac's latest catalogue from beside the antique cash register. It was all part of the mise-en-scène for the carriage trade, the little bell on the door, the baroque cash register, the background music, the catalogue. Not a glossy catalogue, absolutely not. Printed on an expensive matt Italian paper, with elegant woodcuts and line drawings tastefully scattered through its pages, and all the arcana of bibliographical description remorselessly employed. Association copy, author's corrections, foxed, weaselled. It was the catalogue that gave the whole operation credibility, the catalogue that inveigled Scobie in.

A seedy looking youth in a driver's uniform came through the door, peaked hat, identification pass pinned to his tie.

'Hello, lover boy,' said Mac.

'Got the goods?' said the youth.

'A good read, tell him,' said Mac, producing a neatly sealed brown paper wrapped parcel from beneath the counter.

The youth winked like something out of Dickens, took the parcel and left. No cash changed hands, no credit card was processed.

'Who's that for?' asked Claudia.

'Confidential,' smirked Mac. 'Someone in high office. My book search service. I find research material that the parliamentary library doesn't have.'

'I'll bet,' said Scobie.

Mac looked over Scobie's offerings carefully, holding them up to the light, giving a fair impersonation of a diamond trader or a receiver of stolen goods.

'How about some manuscripts,' Claudia asked.

'What would you like?' said Mac.

'No, one of Scobie's,' said Claudia.

Mac laughed.

'I know your manuscripts,' he said. 'You feed Scobie a fistful of pills and get him copying out his last book by hand. Nothing doing. Stick with the National Library.'

'Aw, Mac,' said Scobie.

'Aw, Scobie,' said Mac. 'Good try. I won't say anything. Nobody knows but me. And the rest of the rare book trade. But the libraries don't know. I'm not going to tell them.'

'Because that's what you sell them,' said Claudia.

'Now, now,' said Mac.

'Don't bullshit me,' said Claudia. 'You're just a crook.'

'Takes one to know one,' said Mac. 'There's no reason to get high-minded. No justification either, I would have thought.'

'Get fucked,' said Claudia.

'Claudia,' Scobie wailed. 'Don't abuse him. We're trying to sell these books.'

'There are other booksellers,' said Claudia.

'No, there aren't,' said Scobie.

'Well said, Scobie,' said Mac.

Claudia stormed out of the shop.

Scobie ruffled his hand through his hair in his most winning manner. He turned the full force of his charm on Mac, who reflected it back with his own superadded people-pleasing manner. They swam together in the oleaginous glow.

Mac opened his cash register and took out a couple of notes. He lay them down on the counter beside Scobie's books. Scobie took the notes. Mac symbolically moved the books five centimetres to his side of the counter.

'Done,' he said.

'Good one,' said Scobie, stuffing the notes into his top pocket without looking at them. 'I better go and see to Claudia.'

'Give her my regards,' said Mac.

Claudia was stomping up and down the pavement, furiously puffing at a cigarette.

'What'd you do that for?' said Scobie.

'Insufferable little stoat,' she said.

'We need him,' said Scobie.

'No we don't. We don't need anybody.'

'No, we don't either,' said Scobie. 'That's right, too.'

'What about the photographs?' asked Plant.

'What photographs?' said Claudia.

'Weren't we going to photograph Scobie in Mac's shop?'

'Never,' said Claudia.

'We still need some photographs,' said Scobie.

'We don't have a camera,' said Claudia.

'We were going to buy one,' said Scobie.

'I don't have any money,' said Claudia.

'Nor do I,' said Scobie.

'Plant,' said Claudia, 'where do you get those disposable cameras from?'

'Any chemist,' said Plant.

'There's one in the next block,' said Scobie.

'How do you know?' asked Claudia.

'I know where all the chemists are,' said Scobie.

'You drive,' said Claudia, giving Scobie the keys. 'I'm too upset.'

They got in the Volvo and Scobie drove down the street. He double-parked outside the chemist.

'Just nip in there and get that camera,' Claudia said to Plant.

He did it. He came back with camera and receipt. Claudia took them both.

'We'll fix you up,' she said.

Not that they ever did. Nor, if Plant were honest with himself, had he ever thought they would.

Chapter 9

'We'll go and see Bayes,' said Scobie.

'No,' said Claudia, 'we are not going there.'

'You used to like going there,' said Scobie. 'Once upon a time you couldn't be stopped from going there.'

'Just take me home,' said Claudia.

'In fact as I recall there had to be a restraining order to stop you from going there. Bayes took it out personally.'

'That was years ago,' she said.

'Three years, two months, five days,' said Scobie.

'Just stop it and drive home.'

'I can't stop and drive,' said Scobie. 'It's against the laws of physics.'

'Just do it,' Claudia said.

'Here we come, Tusk, as all the girls say,' said Scobie.

Tuscan Bayes answered the door with bare feet, a wary expression and a drink in his hand, as if expecting to be greeted by photographers telling him he'd won the Nobel Prize.

'Tusk!' Scobie called out.

'Scabies!' said Bayes.

'You're not busy, are you?' said Scobie. 'Not writing any-

thing? Not these days.'

He pushed his way in, not waiting to be asked in case he wasn't.

'Itching to go, I see,' Tuscan commented. 'Rash as ever. Quite a nasty one.'

A couple of young Asian girls draped in white towels peeped over the balustrade.

'You never told me you had children,' said Claudia.

'Creative writing students,' said Bayes.

'From the massage parlour down the street,' said Scobie.

'Keeping up your good name?' said Claudia. 'What happened to the boys?'

'What makes you so sure they're not boys?' said Bayes.

He led them into a bare room with a war game in progress on a trestle table, toy soldiers ranked against each other. On the wall was a whiteboard, covered with words and lists and symbols in black, blue, and red.

'What's that?' asked Scobie.

'It's a story board,' said Bayes.

Scobie peered at it. 'No it isn't. It's a breakdown of the Booker Prize winners.'

'You won't find your name there,' said Bayes.

'Take a photo, Plant,' said Scobie. 'We'll stand in front of it.'

'It's copyright,' said Bayes. 'Not for public release.'

'This isn't for public release,' said Scobie. 'It's going in the National Library archives.'

'Even more reason not to photograph it.'

'No one will see it. I'll get them to put an embargo on it.'

'Even if I believed you,' said Bayes, 'which you know I don't, why would I believe the library?'

'I don't know,' said Scobie.

'Why would you imagine they would honour an embargo if certain forces requested access?' he went on, warming to his theme.

'You wouldn't,' agreed Scobie. 'We'll stand in front of it and take it out of focus so they can't read the words.'

'They can never read the words you want them to read but they always read the words you don't want them to,' said Bayes.

'That's true, too,' said Scobie. 'Why don't you write like you talk? It would be really interesting.'

'No one would read the words.'

'They don't now, so what's the difference?' said Scobie. He put his arm round Bayes in a gesture of friendship, palpably insincere.

Plant took the picture.

'Now we'll have one with your students,' said Scobie. 'Bring on the writing girls.'

'No,' said Bayes and Claudia simultaneously.

'And who's the slim young man with the camera?' asked Bayes. 'Do I know him?'

'My research assistant.'

'A research assistant,' said Bayes. 'The old sexual member worn out? That was the only research tool you used in the old days. And did you get him from a massage parlour too?'

'Off the streets,' said Scobie.

'How louche,' said Bayes. 'And what does your research assistant research?'

'Don't tell him,' said Scobie. 'Don't tell him anything. He'll use it.'

'In evidence against you, Scobie? What are you plagiarizing this time?'

Scobie felt through his pockets for his pills.

'And does he have a name?' asked Bayes.

'Plant,' said Claudia.

'As in plant hire, I see. Well, Plant, I suppose you need watering. What do you drink?'

'Tea,' said Plant.

'I'll have Southern Comfort,' said Scobie.

'And Claudia?' said Bayes.

'I'll have a Campari,' said Claudia.

'Despite what you might think,' said Bayes, 'I have all those beverages. Do you want to try again? Something more inconvenient?'

'Tea will do fine,' said Plant.

'I'll have a beer as well,' said Scobie.

'Would you like to play mother and make the tea while I fix your Campari?' Bayes said to Claudia. 'I'm sure you remember where everything is.'

They went into the kitchen. Scobie followed them.

'How's it going, Scobie?' Bayes asked.

'Fine,' said Scobie. 'Brilliant.'

'It's been a while.'

'It's not. I saw you at writers' week.'

'I mean between books,' said Bayes. 'A while since the last one.'

'Not that long,' said Scobie.

'Anyway, what about you?' snapped Claudia,

'I thought you'd never ask.'

He went out of the kitchen and came back with a shiny new paperback.

'Sign it,' said Claudia.

'The unsigned ones are the rare ones,' said Scobie.

Bayes took out his personalized Mont Blanc fountain pen, ennobled with his engraved autograph, and inscribed the copy, post-modern self-referentiality raised to a higher self-reverential degree.

'Photograph them,' said Claudia to Plant.

Scobie took the proffered book. Plant photographed the presentation.

'This isn't a novel,' said Scobie.

'Did I say it was?' asked Bayes.

'It's journalism.'

'Essays,' corrected Bayes.

'It's old book reviews,' said Scobie.

'You should try writing some one day,' said Bayes. 'Maybe you could get your research assistant to read the books for you if you find reading too hard.'

'That's not a book,' said Scobie.

'It looks like a book, it smells like a book, it opens like a book, it has a bar code like a book, it sells like a book, it makes money like a book,' said Bayes. 'Or don't books make money in your experience?'

But Scobie was immersed in the index, looking up disparaging references to himself. He found them.

'Anyway,' said Scobie, 'I had one out last year.'

'The year before. So you did. It must have slipped my mind.'

'It was in for the State awards,' said Scobie. 'It slipped your mind then.'

'Yes, sorry it didn't get up.'

'So was I,' said Scobie.

'Nothing I could do.'

'You were chairman of the judging panel.'

'Chairperson,' said Bayes, 'yes. But there were so many books.'

'So?'

'We couldn't read all of them. Not for the pittance they pay. So we divided them up. Each judge read a third. And they chose the best of each third. Yours wasn't in my batch.'

'You made sure of that.'

'It seemed only fair. Prior knowledge. Conflict of interest. That sort of thing.'

'So you gave it to a lesbian separatist.'

'Something like that,' agreed Bayes. 'I didn't choose the judging panel. The Ministry does that. The government needs the gay vote. It was so hard,' he went on. 'How to choose. In the end we decided it should be somebody new. I don't know why. It may not have been a good idea.' He smiled sadly.

'But it kept me out.'

'It did have that effect, yes,' conceded Bayes.

'What's this?' said Claudia.

'Oh, nothing,' said Scobie.

'Did Tuscan keep you from winning a prize?'

'Why ask if you know?' said Scobie.

'Did you keep Scobie from winning a prize?'

'Not I,' said Bayes. 'My fellow judges, perhaps. But not I personally.'

'And you had no control over them?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Bullshit,' said Claudia. 'Of course you could have if you'd wanted.'

'Ah,' said Bayes, 'if I'd wanted.'

'You're just jealous of his talent.'

'I think not.'

'You'd do anything to do him down.'

'That's possible,' Bayes conceded.

'We're going,' said Claudia.

Scobie was busy flicking between the index and the text. Claudia tore the book from his hands and tossed it to the floor.

'I think the research assistant missed that,' said Bayes. 'Maybe you should do it again so he can take a photograph.'

'Scobie,' Claudia thundered. 'Out this minute.'

'Calm down, darling,' said Scobie. 'Just take a pill.'

'Out.'

Scobie beamed farewell at Bayes and trotted out.

'Plant,' shrieked Claudia.

Plant headed for the door.

'You must come round some time and let me know how you're getting along with Scobie,' Bayes said to him as he left. 'Sometime soon. I want to know absolutely everything.'

The writing students rearranged their towels creatively at the top of the stairs.

'Where now?' said Scobie.

'Home,' said Claudia.

'Home' said Scobie. 'Now we've alienated everybody so we go home.'

'Just drive home,' said Claudia.

'Why don't we go to the Australia Council and abuse them?' said Scobie. 'Or my publisher. We could go there and you could smash the windows and shout insults at them. Or we could drive to Canberra and go to the National Library and set fire to my papers. Why don't we do that? Make a day of it.'

But they went home.

Chapter 10

Magdalena, the *au pair*, answered the door in housecoat and high heels. She swayed there provocatively. Daddy padded down the hallway in tennis shirt and tennis shorts and tennis socks and tennis shoes.

Plant had one of those moments of doubt he so hated. Had he got the wrong day, got the wrong time, got the wrong game?

'You need something before we start?' Daddy asked.

Magdalena swayed in the doorway.

'I don't think so,' said Plant.

'We'll have a drink down there. We can pour our own,' he said to Magdalena. 'You go and have a nice rest now.'

'You should rest too,' she said.

'Me?' said Daddy. 'No, me, I'm invigorated now. Now I'm going to thrash Mr. Plant.'

It was like playing golf with senior management or the upper military. Or poker with the state premier. The skill lay in letting the opposition win, but not too obviously. You had to give them a hard game, but not too hard. Counter-effective to have them keeling over with a heart attack from the stress. No doubt the *au pair* had to follow the same strategy,

Plant reflected. It was a reflection that put him off his aim, but that was all to the good, made him lose more convincingly. He tried thinking of her again.

'So, Scobie, what is he doing now?'
 'He's working on another novel.'
 'Another? How many has he written?'
 'Seven or eight, maybe.'
 'In how many years?'
 'Oh twenty, twenty-five.'
 'So how long does it take to write a novel?'
 Plant did the sums.
 'Well, I suppose it can take three or four years.'
 'And how long does it take to read a novel?'
 'Depends how fast you read.'
 'Naturally. I am not an idiot.'
 'Three or four hours, I suppose.'
 Daddy slammed away.
 'Tell me,' he said, 'is Scobie a lazy bastard?'
 Plant hesitated.
 'I shouldn't ask you such questions.'
 'No,' agreed Plant.
 'But I think you have told me the answer.'
 Plant concentrated on his game.
 'Why does it take him so long?'
 'Well,' said Plant, 'there's the research.'
 'I thought you did the research.'
 'You can't rush these things,' said Plant. 'A novelist needs to sit and brood.'

'And Scobie's good at that.'
 'It can be important,' said Plant.
 'Can be, can it?' said Daddy.

He slammed away with his cue.
 'It's not always an advantage to write too many books,' said Plant.

'Why not?'
 'It upsets people. It makes them think you're too productive. They resent you.'
 'But they make money.'
 'Some do.'
 'Do Scobie's?'
 'It's hard to know.'
 'You know what I think,' said Daddy. 'I think he's a lazy bastard. I think he should write more and make some money. What's he do all day?'
 'Sleeps most of it,' said Plant. 'But he does work at night.'

They sat on the terrace and savoured their drinks. Daddy glowed with the satisfactions of victory. The harbour stretched in front of them, crisscrossed with the wakes of classic old ferries and contemporary catamarans. Water taxis darted around, cruise ships and pleasure craft offered assorted antipodean delights: sex, gambling, fishing. Pilot vessels and tugs ploughed past purposefully. Huge stacked container vessels lumbered through the heads.

'Beautiful, huh?' said Daddy. 'All those boats. All that transport. There's money in transport. And there's money in cargo. Cargo means production. Production means employment. Employment means wealth. Wealth generation is what it's all about.'

He became pensive in the fading afternoon.
 'But wealth can be a terrible thing.' He gestured out at the harbour. 'People do terrible things to get it. Anything rather

than work. I worked for my money. I made it all. And I don't want some idle writer latching onto my daughter to get my money. Her money. One day it will all be her money.'

He looked round the horizon proprietorially, like Zeus on a good morning in the Mediterranean.

'Do you know how much I'm worth? I won't tell you. Might give you ideas.'

He poured another drink for them both.

'I worry about my daughter. She's a sweet thing. But she's a woman. These Scobies, they can run rings round her. I'm not saying he does, mind you. I've got nothing specific against him. Nothing I can prove. But I worry.'

Plant nodded wisely, silently, wisely silent as ever.

'Those two are hopeless,' Daddy went on. 'They just piss money away like they've got senile incontinence.'

He shook his head sadly.

'You know what you can do for me,' he said. 'Just keep an eye on them. Anything happens, let me know. They decide to buy a boat or get married or something, you let me know.'

'Aren't they married?' asked Plant.

'No,' said Daddy. 'But just you tell me if they plan it.'

Plant considered it. A boat. Marriage. The terrible responsibilities of wealth.

'Sure,' he said.

'It's nothing personal,' Daddy assured him. 'It's a matter of trust. In business I don't trust anyone. Everyone smiles but underneath it's lethal. Lethal. Now some people you know you can't trust. Scobie for instance. Claudia says he's a good writer. He may be. He may be not. I have no opinion on that. But I know about people. Scobie's not someone I would do business with. Now my daughter, she's like her

mother, she's the trusting type. So she has to be watched. She has to be watched because she's too trusting and Scobie has to be watched because I don't trust him. You understand.'

'Absolutely,' said Plant.

'Does that mean yes?'

'Yes,' said Plant.

'Good man,' said Daddy, slapping him on the upper arm. 'I think you and I understand each other. I think we can do business together.'

He rang a little brass bell, filched from some eastern monastery to sit on the terrace table.

'In Naples they have a proverb, those who do business together eat together.'

Magdalena appeared, dressed now in some fetching number.

'We eat something,' Daddy said. 'You got something tasty you can rustle up for Mr. Plant here?'

'Of course,' she said.

She went off rustling.

'She's a smart girl,' said Daddy. 'You try doing any business with her, you'd soon regret it. She's a very smart girl.'

'I'll remember that,' said Plant.

'Good man,' said Daddy. 'I wouldn't trust her either, she tells me everything.'

Magdalena returned with a tray. Matzos, chopped liver, and a Tasmanian brie. Plant helped himself to matzos and brie.

'Are you sure you wouldn't like a taste of chopped liver?' she asked. She held out a forkful towards him, tantalizingly.

He was tempted, by the liver as well as by the temptress. Sometimes it was difficult being a vegetarian and a male. But he stuck with the brie.

Chapter 11

'Daddy's going to Europe,' said Claudia.

'Oh yes,' said Plant. 'Where?'

'Eastern Europe, Central Europe,' she said.

'They don't have names for countries over there,' said Scobie.

'We were cosmopolitan,' said Claudia. 'His family had interests in lots of countries.'

'I bet they did,' said Scobie. 'You'll probably find there's an *au pair* with five kids in every capital city. You'll have all these new relations. Family reunion.'

'It's a business trip,' said Claudia.

'Exactly.'

'Reparations.'

'Is that what they call it?' said Scobie.

'We finally got back what's due to us,' said Claudia.

'I hope not,' said Scobie. 'If that ever looks like happening just make sure you're not around that day.'

'It should be interesting,' said Plant.

'No, it won't be,' said Scobie. 'I don't want to go to Eastern Europe. Even if they call it Central Europe.'

'You'll love it, darling.'

'No, I won't,' said Scobie. 'It's the last place I want to go.'

'It'll give you ideas.'

'I've got enough ideas. I don't want any more.'

'You said you were bored,' said Claudia. 'You said you had nothing to write about.'

'I'll be even more bored in Europe,' said Scobie. 'There's nothing to write about there. It's all been written about already. Thousands of times. It's been written to death. It's like they used to rhyme rats to death in Ireland. They've novelized Europe to death.'

'But there's all Eastern Europe,' said Claudia. 'They were absolutely starved of literature for years.'

'Take them a box of remainders.'

'It's a whole new world. It's a unique opportunity.'

'Take them a dozen boxes,' said Scobie.

'Plant,' said Claudia, 'what do you think?'

'I wouldn't mind going,' said Plant.

'See,' said Claudia.

'Take Plant, then,' said Scobie. 'I'll stop here and mind the house.'

'But you can't, darling.'

'Why can't I?'

'Who'll look after you?'

'Who'll look after me? I'm not incapacitated. I don't need someone to look after me. I can feed myself. I did before I met you.'

'No you didn't,' said Claudia. 'You had all those dreadful women.'

'Well I'll get some more,' said Scobie.

'Don't even think of it, darling,' said Claudia.

'Joke, darling,' said Scobie. 'Plant will look after me.'

Plant said nothing. He concentrated his mental energies on a trip to Europe. Fully paid. It seemed a great idea.

'I am not going round Europe with you and your father,' said Scobie.

'But why not?'

'Because I'm writing a book, that's why not, and I don't want to either, that's why not too.'

'You can write it there.'

'How can I write it there with him there? Asking every five minutes, "How many words you written now, Scobie? Is that all? When I was in the camps I wrote twice as much as that before breakfast. And what do you think they gave us for breakfast?"'

'Daddy had a terrible time,' said Claudia.

'I'm sure he did. And I'm not going to let him give me a terrible time now. You go. You can deal with him.'

'He knows all these people,' Claudia said. 'He'll get you translated into all sorts of languages.'

'You get me translated,' said Scobie. 'You talk to them. You're better at that than he is. Much better. You have the feeling for art. You get the deals set up while I finish off this book here. Then you can claim the trip on tax if you're fixing up translation deals. That'd be great, darling.'

'You could claim it on tax if you were there.'

'Both of us couldn't though.'

'Why not?'

'Because they'd say I could do that myself and you were just having a holiday and then they'd audit us and it would be a nightmare. But if I stay here they can't say that.'

He could see her wavering. He shook out another pill and looked round wildly for inspiration.

'Then we can go over together when the translations are published. The publishers will pay then.'

'They're all so poor,' said Claudia.

'The Australia Council will pay,' said Scobie. 'Foreign Affairs. It'll be like a victory tour. And then you'll know where to go. You'll have it all checked out.'

'Maybe I'll wait till then, then.'

'You can't wait till then,' said Scobie. 'You've got to set up the deals first.'

'Daddy could set them up.'

'No he couldn't. He'll be up to his ears in counting his property. He won't have time for anything else. He'll need you to help him.'

'So when do I arrange the translations?'

'Well, he won't need you all the time,' said Scobie. 'Knowing Daddy there's bound to be some secret deals he can only do himself.'

'He trusts me,' said Claudia.

'Well, what about when he's off chasing bimbos? You can't go curb cruising with him. There'll be lots of time you'd just be hanging around bored.'

'But how do I find the publishers?'

'Ask Daddy. His contacts will know. They know everything.'

'Why don't you come, darling? We'd have a lovely time.'

'We'd have a horrible time. We'll be at Daddy's beck and call twenty-four hours a day. I can't write like that. I have to have peace. Stability. Order. Like you give me here.'

He shuffled round on the table for his teeth and put them in and smiled at her.

'But you go. He needs you. And if you set up the trans-

lations then we can go together next time. We'll be stars.'

'Darling, you're already a star.'

'But rich stars,' said Scobie. 'All those royalties. Like the crowned heads of Eastern Europe.'

'I don't like the idea of leaving you behind,' said Claudia.

'Plant will look after me, won't you Plant?'

Plant smiled. They were his own teeth but his smile was as false as Scobie's. He wanted the trip.

Scobie detected it.

'Next time we'll all go together,' said Scobie. 'You, me, and Plant.'

Plant looked warily, his smile uncertain.

'We'll rent a villa,' said Scobie. 'I'll write a novel. Plant can come and research it. He can start learning the languages now.'

'That'll be terribly expensive,' said Claudia.

'No it won't. We'll rent one of your father's villas. One of the family's. Check out a good one while you're there. Where you'd like to live. Then they can start fixing it up. By a lake, you'd like that. With a tower. Phone us back when you find it so Plant can know which languages to start learning.'

He held them there, fixed in the fantasy they all wanted yet held no trust in. The still lake. The chapel on the island. The villa with its tower and its boathouse. The ancient turquoise waters. The reflected clouds. The splendid sky. The castle on the mountain above.

Chapter 12

'Plant can drive us to the airport,' said Claudia.

'I can drive,' said Scobie.

'No you can't. You'll get lost. You always do.'

'She means I'll get lost on the way back,' said Scobie. 'She's afraid I'll put her on the plane and get picked up by one of those hookers who work the airports.'

'What hookers who work the airports?' asked Claudia.

'They look like wives and girlfriends who've just seen off their man. All dressed up. A bit tearful. Make-up smudged. But artistically smudged. A bit Warholish. Misregistered colour. And you bump into them and they say, "Are you alone too? I shall be so lost." It's all in that Maupassant story.'

'What Maupassant story?' Claudia asked. 'They didn't have airports when Maupassant wrote. There weren't any aircraft.'

'They had balloons,' said Scobie.

'What story?'

'The one about the cemetery. Where this man picks up a woman in widow's weeds and it turns out she's a prostitute. The cemetery was her beat. Preying on widowers. Sex and death. Well, the airport's like that. Literature, you see, it's all

in literature. Fiction, they think it's all made up. But it isn't. Not the real thing.'

'Rubbish,' said Claudia.

'Well, we'll get a taxi,' said Scobie. 'Then I won't have to drive.'

'And how will you get back?'

'I'll get a taxi back,' said Scobie. 'They run both ways, you know. Or I could get a lift with your Dad's bimbo.'

'She's not a bimbo.'

'She could still give me a lift.'

'No she couldn't.'

'See,' said Scobie, 'she's afraid as soon as she and her Dad get on the plane I'll screw the bimbo.'

'Daddy does not have a bimbo.'

'*Au pair*, then,' said Scobie. 'It would be all right,' he added, 'it's not incest or something. She's not a blood relative. He hasn't married her. Has he?'

'Of course he hasn't.'

'Not the marrying kind,' said Scobie. 'There you are then. Keep it in the family, that's what you always say.'

'Plant will drive us,' said Claudia.

So Plant did.

It was bedlam.

'What is all this stuff?' said Daddy.

'Luggage,' said Claudia.

'What luggage?'

'My luggage.'

'What are these boxes?'

'Books.'

'What books?'

'Scobie's books.'

'Scobie's books? What, Scobie's coming? Scobie's not coming. Scobie, where are you?'

'Here I am,' said Scobie.

'You're not coming.'

'No,' said Scobie. 'Have to write another book.'

'So what are these books?'

'No idea,' said Scobie.

'They're to give to people,' said Claudia. 'To present to libraries. They've all been starved for books over there. This will promote Scobie.'

'And who's paying?'

'They're free. They're paid for.'

'Who's paying to take them?'

'They're luggage.'

'You know how much they weigh? You know what this will cost?'

'It's only one way,' said Claudia. 'We won't be bringing them back.'

'They'll have to go to excess baggage,' said the man at the weigh-in counter. 'You can send them excess or unaccompanied.'

'They can't go unaccompanied,' said Claudia. 'They might get lost.'

'You know how much they cost excess?' said Daddy.

They raged at each other.

Plant tried talking to the *au pair*.

'How're you, Magdalena?'

She told him. 'I have a headache. These places always give me a headache. It's all the stress. All the anxiety. I feel it all around me.'

Plant looked around. Was it stress? Or was it erotic expectation? Scobie stood there on the watch for his airport hookers, peering in a febrile daze at likely possibilities as they passed. But Claudia and her father were in high stress mode. Daddy strode across. Plant took the hint and left Magdalena alone. She was too sensitive.

The books went excess baggage.

At the bookstore Scobie scanned the shelves in an increasing ill humour.

'Bayes, Bayes, Bayes, nothing but Tuscan bloody Bayes.'

'Where're your books, Scobie?' said Daddy. 'I don't see your books anywhere. You slipping or something? Or were you never so big? Has Claudia been telling me lies about how big you are? Big in bed, huh? Is that it?' He dug the *au pair* in the ribs. 'He should come to Europe, I'll show him big in bed, heh?'

Scobie glowered.

'So why don't we get some of those boxes back?' said Daddy. 'Give them some of your books here. Where they can read English. No point taking them where they can't read English. Put them in the shop now.'

'You can't do it like that,' said Claudia.

'Why not?' Daddy asked.

'It isn't done that way.'

'Is there a law? If it makes money it can be done any way. Making money, that's the only law. Or maybe nobody reads Scobie's books even in English. Is that why you take boxes of them to give away?'

'They're literature,' said Claudia.

'So?' said Daddy. 'Is there a law against reading them?'

'These are all airport novels.'

'That I see,' said Daddy. 'This is an airport. These are novels. So, airport novels. So?'

'They're rubbish,' said Claudia. 'Scobie is an artist.'

'Art,' said Daddy. 'Art is money. I told you that already. No money, no art. So what is Scobie, the artful dodger, heh?'

'These are all cheap rubbish.'

'So why don't they sell Scobie's expensive artful rubbish? Artful airport novels? Tell me that. If they cost more they make more money. That's business. Or does no one want to buy them?'

It was all too painful. Scobie had had enough. He walked out of the shop and into the departure lounge. He took out his cigarettes and stuck one in his mouth.

'You can't smoke here,' said a man in a blue blazer and grey trousers.

'Why not?' Scobie asked.

'It's prohibited.'

'So who's going to stop me?'

'I am, sir.'

'And who are you?'

'Airport security, sir.'

'Airport security,' said Scobie. 'So why are you dressed up like a North American campus novelist?'

He fiddled with the cigarette, brooding over it.

The security man stood there waiting.

'All right, all right,' said Scobie. 'I'll have one of these instead.'

He dug into his pockets and found a couple of loose pills.

'May I see them, sir?'

'They're prescription pills,' said Scobie, reaching up to his mouth.

The security man grabbed him by the wrist.

'This way if you don't mind, sir.'

'He's a distinguished novelist,' said Plant.

'Is that so?' said the security man.

'Absolutely,' said Plant. 'The Prime Minister called him a National Treasure.'

'Should be locked up somewhere safe then, shouldn't he?' said the security man.

'I'll take him home,' said Plant. 'He's under a lot of stress.'

'And who are you, sir?'

'I'm his personal assistant,' said Plant.

'Departure can be stressful,' said the security man.

'Not for me it isn't,' said Scobie. 'It's a relief, getting that lecherous old gangster off my back.'

'His father-in-law,' Plant glossed.

Claudia rushed up. Plant had nearly got it under control and Claudia rushed up.

'What's going on, darling?'

'I'm being evicted from this imitation bookstore,' said Scobie. 'First they keep out my books, now they arrest the writer.'

'Where are your books?' Claudia asked.

'Nowhere,' said Scobie. 'They aren't anywhere. There's not one of them in the entire shop.'

'That's disgusting, darling, that's appalling.'

She turned on the security man.

'Why aren't Scobie's books on sale?'

'That's not my business, ma'am.'

'Of course it's your business. You should be making sure

the shop's stocked properly.'

'Airport security is my business,' said the security man.

'You should be concerned with literature,' said Claudia. 'It's criminal having a shop like that. You should be arresting the shop-keeper, not Scobie.'

'I'm not arresting anyone at the moment.'

'Well, you should be,' said Claudia. 'It's a public outrage having a shop like that at an international airport without the work of the country's greatest writer.'

The security man stood poised, looked from Scobie to Claudia and back again.

'They should be charged with false trading.'

'If any charges are to be brought -' the security man began.

'No charges,' said Plant. 'No charges. Everyone's just a little stressed at departing.'

'Claudia,' bellowed Daddy, joining them. 'What are you doing? We'll miss the flight. It's boarding.'

'It can wait,' said Claudia. 'This horrid little man is arresting Scobie.'

'Arresting Scobie? Scobie in trouble? Why are they arresting him?'

'They don't have his books in this wretched shop.'

'They're arresting him for that?' said Daddy. 'I told you, get those books back from excess baggage, there's hundred of books there. We still got time to get them,' he assured the security man.

'I don't want his books,' said the security man.

'Nobody wants his books,' said Daddy. 'Seems like that's his problem. Is that the problem? Some problem.'

He took out his wallet and fished out a fifty-dollar bill.

'Now he's done it,' said Scobie. 'Now we'll all be arrested.'
 'I'll take care of this,' said Daddy, passing the note across to the security man.

'Much obliged, sir,' said the security man.

'Claudia,' Daddy ordered. 'Get on the plane. Now.'

She smothered Scobie in an embrace and ran for passport control.

'Mr. Plant,' Daddy continued, 'get Scobie out of here.'

Plant laid a protective hand on Scobie's arm.

'I'll take him home, sir.'

'I'd cut down on his pills if I were you, sir,' said the security man.

'Absolutely,' said Plant.

Scobie started to mutter. Plant tightened his hold.

'Just shut up till we're out of here,' he said.

Magdalena waited demurely as Daddy and the security man shook hands. Scobie looked at her and turned to Plant.

'No,' said Plant.

'No,' agreed Scobie. 'You're right. Let's look for one of the airport hookers. We should've asked the security man. He would have known which they are. He probably runs them. It's probably a huge protection racket. It would make a great novel. Let's go and ask him.'

'No,' said Plant.

'No?'

'No. Remember Fullalove.'

'Poor old Fullalove,' said Scobie. 'No, you're right. Best not to ask anyone anything.'

On the way back from the airport Plant stopped to pick up a six-pack of Corona and a couple of take away pizzas, an

alla Napoletana and a Margherita. Classic and vegetarian. Plant had found over the years that the best vegetarian food was the classic. Peasant food. The traditional Mediterranean. The traditional Middle Eastern. The traditional Indian. The traditional Korean. Societies in which meat was traditionally too expensive for the ordinary people. And Plant considered himself an ordinary person. Certainly not a natural ruler. Scobie never noticed what he was eating anyway, so he was happy with vegetarian. Plant drove him to his chemist so he could collect another bottle of pills, which ensured his happiness.

With Claudia away a peace descended on the house. Plant sat quietly smoking, speculating on what he was missing, castles, casinos, Continental peasant food. It was sad. But at least there was clean air. None of that Central European chemical cloud-cover. And he had Scobie to himself. It was a window of opportunity, surely. Freedom from Claudia's interventions. The run of the house. The phone, the fax, the e-mail. He could surely use it to some advantage. He rolled half a dozen joints while Scobie watched the weather forecasts for the United States on cable television. He washed up. He fed the cat. It was all rather domestic, like the home life of Gilbert and George. When the phone rang Scobie showed no inclination to answer it. Even with Claudia away, the habit of devolution remained embedded.

'Shall I get it?' Plant asked.

'If you want,' said Scobie.

'Mr. Spruce?' an English voice drawled.

'Who's calling?'

'Bentley London,' it said, languidly.

'For you Scobie. Bentley London.'

'That bastard,' said Scobie.

'Shall I say you're not here?'

Scobie scratched around for his pill bottle. 'Better not,' he said, swallowing a couple. He took the phone. 'Bentley,' he said. 'Great to hear from you. When you coming out? Really? Come and stay, no problem, no, she's away, got the place to myself, off in Europe. Yeah, you'd be safer here, give us a call when you get to the airport, we'll pick you up, no just me and my research assistant, no, a bloke, but I can line you up with one if you want, see you, marvellous.'

Scobie put the phone down and took out his teeth and went to the fridge for a beer. He sucked at the bottle.

'That bastard,' he said.

'Who is he?'

'My bastard of a publisher.'

'Is he coming out?'

'He's always coming out,' said Scobie, 'fucking poof. Comes out to stir up the local office and let them know who's boss by sacking a few people.'

'What's he like?'

'Indescribable.'

'Really?'

'Literally,' said Scobie. 'The man who never was. He's like a vampire. When you look in the mirror he isn't there. I tried to write about him once. It was too horrible. I had to stop. I think he knew I was doing it. He's into psychic stuff. I think he picked up what I was doing telepathically and blocked it.'

'Really?'

'Could never finish it,' said Scobie. 'Got sick every time I picked up the typescript. Like this hideous great ectoplasm took me over. Headaches. Exhaustion. Confusion. Sore

gums. Couldn't eat. Stomach seized up. Bowels seized up. Everything I touched felt sticky with ectoplasmic slime.'

He took another swig at the bottle.

'He's a very powerful man. That's what they told me in England in that heavy way they have. They never tell you what they mean. They just say things in a heavy way like it was in *italic* or CAPITALS or **bold** or **ALL THREE**.

"**BENTLEY IS A VERY POWERFUL MAN**," they told me. In other words, watch it.'

'So why did you ask him to stay?'

'I didn't.'

'You did.'

'Are you sure?'

'Positive.'

'He must have hypnotized me. He does that. Maybe we'll go out of town when he arrives. Up the Blue Mountains. We can stay at the Hydro Majestic. It's a good place to write. All those novelists in the thirties used to go off to country pubs to write. Evelyn Waugh. Graham Greene.'

'Why does he want to stay, anyway?' said Plant. 'Surely he could afford a hotel.'

'Of course he could. He's loaded. British establishment. He's just cheap, that's all. Fiddles the expenses.'

'Really?'

'He's a publisher,' said Scobie. 'That's what they do.'

Chapter 13

Claudia had been gone a day. Plant was sorting through the photocopies of reports on severed penises. He hadn't realized there were so many angry women out there, roaming the bedrooms, wielding machetes, Stanley knives, power saws. Scobie tottered around, intoning into a tape-recorder. It was a scene of quiet cottage-industry, thriving small business, eleven o'clock at night, all's well with the world. The flying foxes had gone off somewhere and the seagulls had stopped squawking and fallen asleep. Fish didn't make a noise anyway, unless they were jumping, and they weren't. And then there was a knocking at the door.

'I'll get it,' said Plant.

A small, spiky, blonded creature dressed in black stood on the doorstep.

'So who are you?' she said.

'Who are you?' said Plant.

'None of your fucking business,' she said. 'Where is he?'

'Where's who?'

'You know who I mean. Don't play silly buggers with me.
Where's Scobie?'

'Scobie?'

'Yes, Scobie. Has that witch got him chained up or something?'

'I'm sorry,' Plant began.

'No you're not,' she said. 'I've never seen anyone less fucking sorry. Give me the cab fare, will you, I didn't have enough on me.'

Plant decided to close the door but she beat him to it, sticking a booted foot and leg in the way.

'Don't get smart with me, mister,' she said. 'Call Scobie and give us the fare.'

But she didn't wait for him to do or not do it.

'Scobie,' she yelled, 'Scobie, where're you hiding?'

He emerged on the landing, tape-recorder in hand.

'Valda,' he said brightly. It could have been enthusiastically. Plant could not tell even now with Scobie, whether it was all dissimulation, or whether the authentic just seemed that way too.

'Nada,' she said, 'just you remember it.'

'Nada,' he said.

'And tell this butler of yours to give us the cab fare.'

'Cab fare?' said Scobie.

'You know,' she said. 'Public transport. What you travel in when you don't have a car. Give us the fare. He's sitting out there on the meter.'

'I don't have any money,' said Scobie. 'Plant,' he said, 'do we have any money?'

'He'll take plastic,' said Nada.

'Give him plastic,' said Scobie.

'You'll have to sign it,' said Plant.

Scobie disappeared and came out again with his wallet. He shambled out to the road with Nada. When he returned

they were arm in arm.

'This is Nada,' said Scobie.

'Hello, Nada,' said Plant.

'She was my first girlfriend,' said Scobie.

'Like hell I was.'

'She was my muse.'

'Your fucking muse,' said Nada, 'I'm nobody's fucking muse, I'm my own fucking muse.'

'She's a great writer, Plant,' said Scobie. 'You should read her.'

'I'd be interested to,' said Plant.

'Well tough titty,' said Nada.

'So how did you get my address?' said Scobie.

'A little bird told me,' said Nada.

'Go on.'

'It was written up in a phone box.'

Scobie laughed. Nervously. He shuffled round the kitchen with coffee pot in one hand, randomly lifting up plates and papers.

'What are you doing, Scobie?' she said. 'Sit down, stop fussing.'

'I'm making coffee.'

'Coffee?' said Nada. 'I don't want coffee. Haven't you got a drink?'

He opened the fridge and offered her a beer. She insisted on spirits.

'You must have some somewhere in this fucking necropolis.'

'So who told you where I was?' Scobie asked again, pouring her a Scotch.

'Is it supposed to be such a secret?'

'Yes.'

'I thought it must have been. Hiding out from your old friends?'

'I don't see many any more,' said Scobie.

'That's what I mean. Got you locked up, has she?'

'Who?'

'That dragon lady you shacked up with. Where is she?'

'Claudia's in Europe,' said Scobie.

'That's something,' Nada said.

'So where've you been?'

'I was in Ancient Egypt,' she said.

'So how did you find out where I was?'

'Mac Arber told me,' she said.

'He swore he'd never tell anyone.'

'Well, he told me.'

'How did you get it out of him?'

'I sold him something, didn't I?'

'You sell him a manuscript or something?'

'Never you mind what I sold him. Actually,' she said, 'Mac refused to give me your address but he gave me your phone number. But I wasn't going to phone up and get fobbed off by that madwoman rich witch bitch. So then he gave me the name of someone I happen to know who happened to know.'

'Who?' said Scobie.

'Fullalove,' she said. 'So I went round to see him and after a bit of this and that I got it.'

'What this and that?' Scobie asked.

'Never you mind.'

'You're not on the game.'

'I don't have to tell you what I'm on.'

'You selling drugs?'

'You want some?' she asked. 'Hey, you want to try some of this?'

She produced a little lacquered treasure box and put it on the table. Plant and Scobie gazed at it with interest.

'So what's in the box, then?' Scobie said.

After that the evening went smoothly, oh so smoothly indeed. They sat round the kitchen table, Scobie found a mirror on Claudia's dressing table, and they snorted a few lines of cocaine. After a while they snorted a few more.

'I knew you'd like it,' said Nada. 'I thought, who would appreciate this? Scobie, I thought, that poor boy locked away again, he'd appreciate it, take him out of himself, make him remember the old days.'

'The old days,' said Scobie.

'The old days have come back,' said Nada. She cackled. 'We'll save you from that witch in Europe. Give you something to write about. That's what you need. Look at this house. How could you ever write in this? It's a mausoleum. You need to live again, doesn't he, Plant?'

'Living's good,' agreed Plant. 'Up to a point.'

They snorted a few more lines.

'So it should be,' said Nada.

'Nada was a genius,' said Scobie. 'She was the best of us all.'

'What's this "was"?' said Nada, taking the fifty-dollar bill out of her nose. 'I still am.'

'That's right,' said Scobie. 'She still is. Always will be. The trouble is –'

'What do you mean, trouble?' said Nada.

'She's too good for them,' said Scobie. He snorted up a line

of coke. 'There's nothing in print.'

'I wouldn't give them my books if they –' Words failed her.

She was a genius in her own estimation. And in Scobie's too it seemed. But she wouldn't let them tamper with her talent.

'They wanted to change it,' she said.

This was the last book. Or maybe it was the first. Plant was losing track. Maybe it was both. Maybe they were the same one.

'That's my lifeblood, I told them. You're not changing it. That's like a fucking transfusion and you'll fucking contaminate it and I'm not having it. Either you print it as it is or you don't print it at all.'

'So what happened?' asked Plant.

'What do you think happened?' said Nada.

'They didn't print it,' said Scobie. 'She's got all these brilliant manuscripts and none of them's been published. You're insane, Nada,' he said. 'Just give them a book and let them do what they want. It doesn't matter. It's only words.'

'You're supposed to be an artist,' said Nada.

'I am,' said Scobie. 'Just don't worry about it, that's all. Publishers aren't worth arguing with.'

'I refuse to compromise my art,' said Nada.

'You're insane.'

'You've sold out, Scobie,' said Nada.

'Nothing wrong with selling out as long as you get a good price,' said Scobie.

'For all this,' said Nada, gesturing at the kitchen, the room beyond, the dimmed water view, the darkened suburb.

Scobie blinked and followed the line of her hand. He smiled

appreciatively.

'It's good, isn't it?' he said.

'You're writing crap,' said Nada. 'Just for this.'

'At least people read it.'

'Who reads it?' she asked.

'People,' said Scobie. 'Which is more than can be said for you. The only readers you get are cockroaches and silverfish.'

'I never met anybody who reads you,' said Nada. 'You're just polluting the bookstores.'

'Rather than the left-luggage lockers,' said Scobie.

When it looked like the coke had run out Plant left them to it. He drove back to his flat through the city's bright lights, the night world sharp and clear cut and surgically precise.

Scobie was making breakfast, making coffee and frying dead pig and tomato in a flurry of smoke and steam that misted over the wintery twilight. Nada emerged in assorted towels.

'So what did you say you were writing?' Scobie asked.

'What do you mean, what did I say I was writing?' Nada asked.

Scobie sat there puzzled. He tried for ways to reformulate it. But before he had found any Nada was in full tirade.

'How can I write anything? Where have I got to write anything? What have I got to write anything with?'

Scobie blinked. Pill time.

'Where do I ever get the peace to write anything? It's all right for people like you. Wives, servants, houses, cars, computers. What have I got?'

'Your genius,' said Scobie.

'Since when did that ever help anybody?' asked Nada. 'Who wants genius? Who wants talent? All they want is hacks

who'll write anything.'

'That's true,' agreed Scobie.

'Of course it's true,' said Nada. 'Are you implying I'm a liar or something?'

'No,' said Scobie, 'I agreed it was true.'

'As if what I said wasn't usually true.'

'Not at all,' said Scobie, 'the opposite in fact.'

'What would you know about truth anyway?' said Nada.

'I don't know,' said Scobie. 'Depends which way you look at it. Not much. Quite a lot. One or the other. Or somewhere in between.'

'How can I write without a typewriter?' said Nada.

'Dictate,' said Scobie. 'That's what I do. It's much quicker. You just talk into the machine.'

'I know what dictating is,' said Nada. 'I'm not illiterate, I'm a fucking writer too.'

'And a good one,' said Scobie.

'And a lot of good that ever did me,' said Nada. 'What's the good of being a genius when you don't even have a typewriter?'

'You can write in longhand,' said Scobie.

'How can you send a publisher something in longhand?'

'I thought you weren't sending things to publishers.'

'You'd like that, wouldn't you? Keep down the competition. You'd prefer I never sent anything to anyone.'

'No I wouldn't,' said Scobie.

'Well get me a typewriter.'

'A typewriter,' said Scobie. 'I don't have one. I don't think they make them anymore.'

'So how do you type your books, Mr. Smartarse?'

'On the computer.'

'Well, lend me a fucking computer,' said Nada.
 'Can you use one?'
 'I'll learn, won't I?'
 'It takes ages.'
 'Just because I'm a woman you think I'm stupid?'

'No,' said Scobie.
 'Get me the computer.'
 'But I'm using it.'
 'No you're not, you're sitting here.'
 'But as soon as I've had breakfast I will be.'
 'I thought you said you dictated.'

'Only the first draft. I'm revising now.'

'You only got one computer?'

'There's Claudia's, but –'

'So she's not using it, is she? So get that.'

Scobie hesitated.

'Did she take it with her?'

'I don't think so.'

'So what's the problem?'

'She doesn't like people using her things.'

'She should have thought of that when she shacked up with you.'

'What do you mean?' said Scobie.

'Just get it,' said Nada.

Scobie brought out a power book and cleared a space on the kitchen table.

'You can work here if you want.'

'I can't write in a kitchen,' said Nada. 'What do you think I am? A scullion?'

'What's a scullion?' asked Scobie.

'You're the writer. You're supposed to know about words,

you find out.'

'Do you want to use one of the bedrooms?'

'I'm not a fucking harlot either,' said Nada.

'So where do you want to work?'

'Call me a cab,' said Nada.

'You can't write in a cab,' said Scobie.

'I'm going home.'

'I thought you had nowhere to live.'

'I've got friends, haven't I? I haven't turned my back on them and hidden away in a secret address. I can always find somewhere.'

'You can work here,' said Scobie.

'How can I work here? I need my papers.'

'We can order the papers.'

'My manuscripts,' said Nada.

'Bring them here.'

'And have you steal them? Just order me that cab, Scobie.'

'I don't know the number,' said Scobie.

'Then get Plant to,' said Nada. 'He knows everything, don't you Plant?'

'I can call you a cab,' said Plant.

'Then do it,' she said.

He did it. Nada watched to make sure, then went off to dress.

She returned the next afternoon. Plant made the coffee, Scobie went off for Claudia's mirror, and Nada produced her stash. They sat round the table.

'Where d'you get all that?' Scobie asked.

She tapped her nose, red and tender as it was.

'I have my methods,' she said.

They got stuck into it.

Nada put on a record. It involved a tirade about Scobie's musical taste. 'Or is it that rich bitch's? This stuff's all prehistoric.'

'Claudia never throws anything out,' said Scobie.

'Wait till she finds me here,' said Nada.

'She'll be cool,' said Scobie.

'No she won't.'

'No, she probably won't,' Scobie agreed. He took another snort.

'You can always stay with me,' Plant said.

Nada looked at him, one pair of bloodshot eyes to another.

'I'm sure,' she said.

'So what are you writing?' Scobie asked.

'What do you mean, what am I writing? Why do you keep asking me that?'

'I thought you wanted a typewriter to write something.'

'Well I didn't get one, did I?'

'I loaned you the computer.'

'I don't know how to use a computer,' said Nada. 'How can I write on that?'

'So what did you do with it?'

'I pawned it, what do you think I did with it?'

'You pawned it?'

'Of course.'

'Claudia's computer?'

'I don't know whose it was,' said Nada. 'The one you gave me.'

'Pawned it?' said Scobie. 'What for?'

'For money, of course. How do you think I bought this?'

She gestured at the diminishing mountain of cocaine.

'You pawned it for this?'

'Yes.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Well,' she said, 'you wanted coke. Either I sold myself or pawned the computer. Which would you prefer?'

Scobie sat there silent, uncertain.

'How do you think people get drugs? I'm not going to stand on William Street all fucking night. Not when I don't have to.'

'Nada,' said Scobie.

'Scobie,' she responded. 'You go down there and peddle your arse if you're so fucking keen.'

'What have you done?' said Scobie.

'I told you. Pawned your computer - '

'It wasn't my computer. It was Claudia's,' said Scobie.

'What's the difference?' said Nada.

'Huge,' said Scobie.

'So I pawned the computer and brought you some drugs. Don't you want the drugs?'

'Yes, but - ' He held his head in his hands. 'Claudia will go ballistic.'

'Too late to worry about that now,' Nada said.

Scobie groaned.

'Enjoy,' said Nada.

There was nothing else to do. They enjoyed.

Chapter 14

Plant had taken over Claudia's role as phone answerer. Nothing had been said. It was just that the telephone would ring and Scobie would disregard it. Originally Plant had assumed that Claudia had unilaterally policed it, vetting all calls, preventing Scobie from any direct contact with the world. Now he wondered. Now it seemed it suited Scobie to be cushioned from the world; he was happy that the phone was answered for him, he preferred if that way. Unless Claudia had so efficiently policed it that Scobie had been conditioned into disregarding it, terrified of answering it, prohibited from getting within two metres range of it. And few people who phoned expected to be able to speak to Scobie. They had become used to encountering an intermediary. And now Plant was it. Scobie preferred not to be summoned, preferred to let Plant list the messages, even make the decisions.

'Just say yes,' he told Plant. 'I can always not show on the day. Most of the time nothing happens anyway. They ask will you write this movie or will you let them make a television play of this book or will you fly to this festival, and that's the last you ever hear of them. It's not worth worrying about them. Just say yes and forget it. Eighty-five per cent never happens.'

And the rest you can just say you forgot and they don't bother you again. Unless you want to do it. So just say yes.'

Scobie's solution. Plant learned to just say yes.

Then there were the follow up calls. The fifteen per cent that happened.

'Scobie promised us a piece on the Australian Christmas. We were wondering when it was coming?'

'I'll check,' said Plant.

'When's Christmas coming?' said Scobie.

'December the twenty-fifth,' said Plant. 'Have you written it yet?'

'On its way.'

'Like Christmas,' said Plant.

'Christmas?' said Nada. 'What's that when it's at home? We never had Christmas. Scobie never had Christmas, did you Scobie?'

'No,' said Scobie.

'We were too poor,' said Nada.

'Still are,' said Scobie.

'Well, *Australasian New Woman* is waiting for your piece on it,' said Plant.

Scobie groaned.

'Tell them this is the year Santa Claus never came,' said Nada.

'I don't want to piss them off,' said Scobie.

'Yes you do,' said Nada.

'Do I?'

'Stand up for your rights,' said Nada.

'I don't think rights really come into it,' said Plant.

'Oh, so you're the lawyer now, are you? Getting a bit uppity, aren't we? Why don't you fucking write it then?'

'Can't do that,' said Scobie.
 'Why not?' asked Nada.
 'Just can't.'
 'Why not?'
 'Wouldn't be proper.'
 'Wouldn't be proper?'
 'Ethical.'
 'Ethical?'
 'You know, right.'
 'Right?' said Nada. 'Dreaming of a right Christmas, are you Scobie?'
 'I don't mind,' said Plant.
 'See,' said Nada.
 'See what?'
 'He's already got it written, haven't you Plant?'
 'Have you?' said Scobie. 'In that case -'
 'Well,' said Plant.
 'Go on,' said Nada, 'say you have. Of course he has.'
 'Has he?' said Scobie. 'Have you?'
 'Go on, Plant,' said Nada, 'you can do it. Use your imagination.'

'It wouldn't take long,' said Plant.
 'Great,' said Scobie.
 'Let's go,' said Nada.
 'Go?' said Scobie. 'Where?'
 'Out,' said Nada. 'Get you out. You've been locked up so long you've gone stir crazy. Let's get you out. On the streets. Leave the place quiet so Plant can get his piece written. Your piece written.'

'Is that all right?' Scobie asked Plant.
 'No problem,' said Plant.

'You've got to get out, Scobie,' said Nada. 'You've got to see the world.'
 'I can see it,' said Scobie. 'Boats. Birds. Barges. Clouds. Look, see.'
 'That's not the world,' said Nada.
 'It looks like the world to me.'
 'Quite a nice one,' agreed Plant.
 'That's the trouble,' said Nada.
 'I thought you liked trouble,' said Scobie.
 'You want trouble?' asked Nada. 'I'll give you trouble.'
 'I don't want that much trouble,' said Scobie.
 'That's your problem,' said Nada. 'You won't commit yourself. You never get into anything. You might as well be in jail if you ask me. That rich bitch witch warder has got you locked up. What's she done, implanted an electronic bug in your prick so you daren't get it up?'

Plant rolled a joint reflectively and looked at the view of the quite nice world. Nada ran a moistened finger over Claudia's mirror and licked it.

'We've got to go out anyway,' she said. 'We're out of drugs.'

'Plant's got some,' said Scobie.

'Real drugs,' said Nada. 'Not recreational drugs. They're just play drugs.'

Plant shrugged. He rolled himself a joint, anyway.

'What's in the mail, Plant?' Nada demanded.

'Usual stuff,' said Plant. 'Directory of Famous People, get your name in and buy a copy for three hundred dollars. Postgraduate student wanting a questionnaire filled in for a thesis she's writing, what's your favourite author?'

'You can fill those in,' said Scobie. 'Only don't buy the

Directory, just update the entry. And send the student a photograph. One of those postcards of me.'

'What about money?' said Nada.

'Couple of cheques.'

'Give them here,' said Nada.

Plant passed them across to Scobie who handed them to Nada.

'Not enough. If we're going to have a good time we need more than that. A lot more than that. How much have you got in the bank?'

'Not much,' said Scobie.

'What do you mean not much?' said Nada. 'What do you do with it all? You're supposed to be loaded. Look at this mausoleum.'

'It's all in an investment account,' said Scobie.

'Well, get it out.'

'I can't.'

'Why not?'

'It needs Claudia's signature.'

'Forge it.'

'I can't do that,' said Scobie.

'Of course you can.'

'She keeps the books at the bank and we'd have to go in there to sign them. They'd see it wasn't her.'

'She's got it all worked out, hasn't she?'

Scobie took a couple of pills.

'That's your answer, is it?' said Nada.

He shook his head to swallow them.

'Eloquent, isn't he?' she said to Plant.

Plant held his breath to maximize the absorption of THC.

'What a pair,' said Nada. 'Well, let's sell something.'

'There's some books in the cellar,' said Scobie.

'Books!' Nada's scorn was worthy of an arts administrator.

'Who wants books?'

'We could sell some to Mac.'

'We need real money,' said Nada. 'Can't you mortgage the house?'

'Her Dad's already mortgaged it,' said Scobie. 'He gets a cheap loan for his company that way.'

'Is there any jewelry?' Nada asked. She wandered off to look. She was half up the hallway when she called out.

'Paintings,' she said. 'We'll sell one of these paintings.'

Scobie and Plant joined her in the hall. The serried ranks of Scobies gazed back at them.

'You can't sell them,' said Scobie.

'You want to bet?' said Nada. 'Which one is the most valuable?'

'They're all valuable.'

'Which one?'

'The one in the bedroom.'

'That hideous thing?' said Nada.

'It's not hideous,' said Scobie.

'It's a sentimental wank,' said Nada. 'No wonder it's in the bedroom.'

'It's valuable, the artist's a National Treasure,' said Scobie.

'So what, so are you,' said Nada.

'Yes, but it's worth a fortune.'

'That's why we're selling it,' said Nada. 'Let's get it.'

She set off up the stairs. Scobie scurried along behind, whimpering 'Nada.' Plant followed.

'Perfect,' said Nada. 'They'll lap it up.'

'It's not for sale,' said Scobie.

'You want drugs or you want to wake up to a bad painting every afternoon?'

'It's not that bad,' said Scobie.

'It is,' said Nada.

'It was a gift,' said Scobie. 'It's got sentimental value.'

'I didn't imagine you'd gone and bought it,' said Nada.

'I can't sell it.'

'Yes you can,' said Nada. 'It'll be clear profit.'

'But it's personal.'

'You're afraid you won't know who you are if you don't have it there?'

'It's not that.'

'What's the point of having a painting of yourself? You know what you look like. You know who you are. Don't you? Or don't you?'

'Of course I do.'

'Anyway, drugs'll fix that up if you don't.'

'I do.'

'So sell it so people who don't know who you are can see it. It's crazy having it here. You want fame, you want publicity, you're a National Treasure too, so sell it somewhere where people will see it.'

'That's a thought.'

'It ought to be in the National Gallery.'

'Yeah,' agreed Scobie.

'So sell it.'

'What, drive down to Canberra?'

'You don't sell it that way,' said Nada. 'Even you ought to know that. You sell it to a dealer who's got a deal with them.'

'Who?' said Scobie

'We'll ask Mac,' said Nada. 'He'll know.'

'I don't know,' said Scobie. 'It seems like an insult to the artist. What would he think?'

'Think?' said Nada. 'He's never had a thought in his life.'

'He isn't as bad as that,' said Scobie.

'He is.'

'Yes, he is.'

'He'll understand, anyway, if he's a real artist. Real artists understand about drugs,' said Nada. 'Ring us a cab, Plant.'

'Nada,' Scobie whined. 'You can't. I'm not ready.'

'Phone it for twenty minutes' time,' said Nada.

Plant waited.

'Just do it,' Nada yelled at him. 'And you!' She glared at Scobie. 'Get ready.'

Plant phoned.

Scobie got ready.

Nada re-emerged in Claudia's pearls and a slinky red dress, her spiky hair gelled down. She was every inch the scarlet woman of every iconic writer's dreams, more than worthy to grace the arm of a National Treasure, indeed a National Treasure in herself.

Plant lit a joint and put his feet up. One thing about the house, it was well furnished. There were always stools and poufs to put your feet up on, the chairs were comfortable to sit back in. When it came to furnishings, Claudia had certainly not stinted. Presumably Daddy had footed the bill. He offered a silent prayer of thanks that Nada had only seen the market value of the painting.

There were clearly advantages in being rich, advantages and pleasures. Plant savoured the pleasures. The comfortable

chairs. The Persian carpets. He left thoughts of defoliated forests, impoverished peasants, and child labour for Fullalove to expound. The wide expansive view gave him a more than aesthetic satisfaction, yachts bobbing in the moonlight. Though, thinking of it, he thought, it wasn't that he especially liked looking at yachts. They were all right. They had their place. But looking at them, no, he felt he would rather own one than just look, he would rather have his own moored there, complete with stateroom, bar, with crew preferably, people to run it for him. Not the sailing variety, either, too much trouble, too many skills to learn. A powerboat. Like Arnold Bennett's steam yacht rather than Jack London's sailing boat. Like Robert Maxwell's really. A publisher's boat rather than a writer's. Serious wealth.

Surely they could afford it. Surely Claudia's father could run one on one of the companies. Why didn't they incorporate the writing side as a company? A subsidiary with all the tax advantages? And the deductions. The car. The yacht. Could write a book about it, the yacht. The cruise of the something or other. *Verité*. Legitimate expenses. How long could it take to write a book? Make it three years start to finish. You could run a yacht for three years as an expense. Negative gearing or something. There was obviously some way to do it. It seemed wanton not to take advantage of the possibilities. How long could your expenses exceed your income? If it was a subsidiary of Claudia's father's empire, it could run for ever, endlessly minimizing tax, surely. Even five years would do. Plant felt he would like to have a yacht. Paintings hanging on the bulkhead or wherever you put them. Nautical paintings. Turners and Canalettos. Travel stuff. Gauguins, maybe.

He brooded on it for a while, ran it all past again. Why not?

If you claimed to be a creative writer why not be creative? Truly creative. Why just think up plots, why not put them into practice? Wasn't there something absurd about thinking up ideas and then just leaving them there as pure thought, written down, packaged, sold, but never implemented? In some ways Nada was right about it. Writing was all in the head, you needed to get out and be, do, live.

But not her sort of living. That was all too literary. *Nostalgie pour la boue*. He did not share it. He could see no advantages in the low life. He had felt that strongly when he watched Fullalove being beaten up. There was no point in being at that end of the great chain of being.

Though it was all part of the chain. The low life could be a way in, it was all linked up. The point was to start climbing up the chain, out of the abyss. Not down. He rather felt Nada was taking Scobie down the chain. Well, so be it. It was not for him to interfere. He would take the opportunity of going in the opposite direction. You only got one crack at most opportunities. This was it.

He prowled around the house. The spare bedroom seemed fine. Nada hadn't been using it, not even to put her bags in. Well, she didn't have any bags, did she? She'd moved straight in with Scobie, which made it easier.

He found sheets in the linen cupboard and made up the bed.

In the morning he woke to the sun on the harbour, the yachts bobbing at anchor bit, seagulls wheeling round making seagull noises, and the purr of powerful motors, the attractive sounds of wealth, or its employees. He liked it. He really did.

He walked past Scobie's bedroom. The door was open,

there was no one there. He hadn't expected there to be. Not even the simulacrum of the writer hung there any more. It seemed like a sign, an absent sign, appropriate for this post-modern age.

He went downstairs and made coffee. Then he began cleaning up the kitchen, loading the dishwasher, emptying the ashtrays, throwing out the litter of packaging strewn over the table. There was no need to live in squalor if you had wealth. And the wealth was there. All around. He took the mirror back to the bedroom, put whatever he could back in cupboards, cleared out the vegetables that were sprouting and rotting in the kitchen, stuffed books back in their shelves, assembled magazines in stacks. It was nothing major but it took three or four hours. It looked a lot better. He had made a decision and he felt comfortable in it. Now the place was tidied up he could feel comfortable.

Scobie and Nada didn't show up all day, or the following day. Nor did Plant expect them to. The proceeds of the painting would keep them busy for a week at least.

It was peaceful in the house without Scobie droning around dictating and burbling on. And there were things to do. *Australasian New Woman* phoned up. They simply loved the Christmas piece. Absolutely spot on. What they were thinking was, how about something for the next issue?

'I'm sure Scobie would be happy to,' said Plant.

'It's a holiday special,' they said.

'So what you need is a sort of "What I did in my Summer Holidays."

'What a good idea,' they said. 'Yes, that would be super.'

'No problem,' said Plant.

'What did Scobie do?'

About a kilo of cocaine, said Plant, silently. 'You'll love it when you see it,' he assured them.

He sat down and wrote it.

Scobie and Nada remained missing all week. Plant wondered vaguely if he should do something. But there was nothing really to be done. Phone the police and say they'd gone on a drug binge, would you look out for them? Phone Claudia in Transylvania and say Scobie was off with some junkie chick? None of it would do any good. So he did nothing. Nothing in regard to that. They were adults. Irresponsible adults, but that wasn't in itself a legal offence yet. They'd be at one hotel or another, until they ran out of money and were kicked out. It didn't really matter which one they were at. He would hear soon enough if there was any trouble, and if there wasn't any trouble he was quite happy not to hear anything. So he looked after the house, stayed there, kept it running, enjoyed the view, the ambience, the space and peace. Fielded the phone calls. Sent off the piece on what I did on my summer holidays. It was a full enough life.

They came back after ten days. Ravaged. Suitably ravaged. Black bags under the eyes. Twitches. Red noses. Bad sinus.

'We thought of phoning you,' said Scobie, 'but we knew you wouldn't be worried.'

They'd holed up in a hotel and consumed the portrait's exchange value and more, reached the credit card limit, got thrown out. Now they were out of drugs, out of credit, out of cash.

'It's all experience,' said Scobie. 'Material for a great novel.'

'So you had a good time,' said Plant.

Scobie blinked. 'Great,' he said. 'Great.'

Nada sniffed.
'That's all that matters, then,' said Plant. 'You enjoyed yourselves.'
'Say yes to drugs,' said Nada.

Chapter 15

Bentley phoned again to confirm.
'Claudia still in Europe?'
'Yes,' said Plant.
'Can I get that from Scobie?'
'He wants to speak to you, Scobie,' said Plant.
'Tell him to piss off,' said Nada.
'He's my publisher,' said Scobie.
'All the more reason,' said Nada.
'Yes,' said Scobie, 'still away.'
'Sure?'
'Of course I'm sure. You think I wouldn't notice something like that.'
'Just checking,' said Bentley. 'If you're on your own why don't you come out here for a couple of days? All sorts of goodies.'
'Where's here?' said Scobie.
'Bangkok. But we can go up to Chiang Mai.'

'Bangkok?'
'Bangkok?' said Nada. 'I'd be in that.'
'I'm writing a book,' said Scobie.
'Bring it with you,' said Bentley.

'I can't do that.'
 'Put it aside, then.'
 'I'd lose track of what I was doing.'
 'Who'd notice?' said Bentley.
 'It's too hard,' said Scobie.

'See you when it's finished then,' said Bentley. 'I'll be in Friday morning. Six-thirty.'

'Six-thirty in the morning?' said Scobie.
 'Tell him to get a cab,' said Nada.
 'Too late,' said Scobie, 'he rang off.'
 'I bet he did,' said Nada.

Plant offered to meet him.

'Would you?' said Scobie. 'Really? Would you really? You're a ripper, Plant. Did I ever tell you that? A ripper. Otherwise we'd have to stay up all night. We could do that. If we had some coke. Bentley'll have some coke, he always does. Nothing but the best. Except we'd need it before he got here, that's the trouble. Would you really do that? You'd go and meet him? I'll make it up to you. Remind me. Don't let me forget it.'

Plant smiled benevolently.

'It's no problem,' he said.
 But Nada found a problem.

'Where're we going to put him?' she asked.
 'Who?' Scobie asked.
 'Your publisher or whoever you reckon he is.'
 'He's my publisher.'
 'Well, where's he going to sleep?'
 'In the spare room.'
 'Plant's in the spare room.'
 'Is he?'

'I stayed there while you were away,' said Plant. 'Kept an eye on the place.'

'That was nice of you,' said Scobie.
 'Very nice,' said Nada.
 She gave him a hard look. A hard look from Nada was enough to turn a Gorgon into stone.
 'So where do we put him?'
 'Who?' Scobie asked. 'Plant?'

'Plant's got a home to go to, haven't you, Plant?' said Nada.

'I do,' said Plant.
 'So you could go to it, couldn't you?' said Nada.
 'I could,' agreed Plant.
 'So we put this publisher in the spare room.'

'That's what I said,' said Scobie. 'Seems the obvious place.'

Well it was, wasn't it? Plant reflected. But it wasn't what he'd had in mind. Though there again, living in a house full of Scobie, Nada and Scobie's publisher wasn't what he'd had in mind, either. He could see who would be the general dogsbody in that crowded household. A temporary withdrawal probably wasn't such a bad manœuvre. Just a tactical retreat.

'Fine,' he said, smiling at Nada.
 She glowered back.

Plant stood at the arrivals gate with a cardboard sign proclaiming BENTLEY.

'I say, put that away,' said Bentley. 'Don't want everyone reading that. Don't know who might be here. Might be some author around.'

Plant folded up the nameplate and picked up the suitcase Bentley had put down for him.

'Where's Scobie?'

'He's at home.'

'Still sleeping?'

'He tends to work late,' said Plant.

'All through the night,' said Bentley. 'Like the men of Harlech.'

They headed out to the car park.

'And you are who?'

'I'm Plant.'

'How very ecological. Some sort of gopher for Scobie?'

'I'm his research assistant.'

'Of course,' said Bentley. 'That's what they all say. Is Claudia here?'

'She's in Europe.'

'Allah be praised,' said Bentley. 'Definite is it?'

'Yes, definite.'

'Thank the Lord for that. Away for long?'

'Another three weeks.'

'Should be out of the place by then,' said Bentley. 'And you, Plant?'

'Yes?' said Plant.

'You write too?'

'Yes,' said Plant.

'Guessed as much,' said Bentley. 'Go to Hollywood and every waiter or cabbie is an actor; come out here and they're all writers. What do you write? Not poetry?'

'No, journalism, a bit of fiction.'

'Published?'

'Here and there.'

'Good stuff?'

'Grade A,' said Plant.

'Working on a novel?'

'Yes.'

'Don't mind if I don't ask to see it,' said Bentley. 'Too many writers. Inconsiderate bunch. You just get one of their books in print and they send you another. Terrible business. How's Scobie?'

'Scobie's good.'

'Slowing down a bit?'

Plant hesitated.

'Hope so,' said Bentley. 'Don't want these chaps writing too much. Can't keep up. Need to play a bit more. All work and no play makes a chap a dull boy. Keep telling them that.'

'I think he'll be ready to play,' said Plant.

'While the queen of the jungle's away? I'm sure he will. Thank heavens for small mercies. When do you say she's back?'

'Three weeks.'

'I'll be gone by then,' said Bentley again. He blinked into the sun and sniffed the air with its pervasive odour of aviation fuel. 'What a glorious morning it is.'

Plant carried Bentley's suitcases up to the spare room and then retreated to Scobie's study. Since Scobie preferred to sit in the kitchen or pace around the bedroom, the study had the tranquillity of sanctuary, a forgotten chapel in a ruined monastery. He rolled a smoke and gazed at the water from a different angle. A barge throbbed by with two skips full of rubble, the sun shining on it as colourfully as it shone on the yachts and powerboats.

There really wasn't a lot to do. There really wasn't anything to do. Scobie seemed not to have got back into any routine since the ten-day binge. Nada would go out once in a while and come back with a morsel of drugs. The rest of the time they watched television in the bedroom or padded round the kitchen, opening tins of beans and eating them from the tin, making toast, making coffee.

There was a tap on the door.

'Yes,' said Plant.

It opened and Bentley stuck his head in.

He sniffed the dope fumes.

'Busy?'

'Average,' said Plant.

'Mind if I come in?'

'Have a seat,' said Plant.

Bentley closed the door.

'Mind if I have puff?'

Plant handed him what was left of the joint.

'I'll roll another.'

'Good fellow,' said Bentley. 'Bit rugged out there.'

'Can be,' said Plant.

'Going at each other like cat and dog. Who is the spiky lady when she's at home?'

'I don't think she has a home,' said Plant. 'She seems to be using this as home.'

'How does the lady Claudia feel about that?'

'Claudia has yet to be apprised of the fact.'

'Should be fun,' said Bentley.

'Indeed,' said Plant.

'What did you say you were?' asked Bentley.

'Scobie's research assistant.'

'Not the butler?'

'Not the butler.'

'You sound like a butler,' said Bentley.

'I endeavour to give satisfaction,' said Plant.

'And what are you researching?'

'Scobie's latest.'

'Naturally. And what's that?'

'Well,' said Plant.

'You can trust me.'

Plant didn't, not for a moment. But that wasn't the point.

'Until Nada came along he was working on this medical malpractice novel.'

'And now?'

'Well, things have been a bit disrupted with Claudia away.'

'A trifle,' said Bentley. 'A trifle disrupted, I think butlers would say.'

Plant lit up the joint.

'And this Nada, she's a writer?'

'So the lady says,' said Plant.

'Any good?'

'A writer of genius, she says.'

'Aren't they all?' said Bentley. 'Have you read anything?'

'She doesn't publish.'

'Why's that? Women's business? Secret lore? She some sort of indigenous person?'

'Publishers seem not to appreciate her work.'

'That old chestnut,' said Bentley. 'Doesn't mean she's no good, of course.'

'Not at all,' agreed Plant.

'Could well be a genius. Just non-commercial.'

'Something like that,' agreed Plant.
 Bentley smiled. A publisher's smile.
 'Sexy piece of goods, too.'
 Plant nodded agreement.
 'Maybe I should sniff her out,' said Bentley.

Chapter 16

Back in his flat Plant felt dissatisfaction. He wouldn't have described it as deep. Not deep dissatisfaction. Deep was not a preferred word of his, except in specific instances, like the deep end of a swimming pool, and he didn't have one. In a world of surfaces a word like deep was not necessary. But dissatisfaction was. Regretfully. He would have preferred a world without the necessity of a word like dissatisfaction. A world of swimming pools, perhaps, no less unnecessary, but betokening wealth. Would dissatisfaction be easier to bear in a swimming pool? He had resolved that it was not for him to question the world's ordering. The world was. He recalled Carlyle's reply to the young lady who declared 'I accept the universe.' 'By God, she'd better.' He agreed with Carlyle.

But accepting the universe did mean the acceptance of dissatisfaction. Not as a permanent condition, though. Nada was warning enough against that. Nada was warning that dissatisfaction was something best done away with.

He looked round his flat. He registered only the smallness, the darkness, the noisiness; whether he stayed in his room or looked out at the insalubrious neighbourhood, it was equally dissatisfying. Motley-clad things tramped the pavements

eating hamburgers and drinking milkshakes, scattering scraps and slops around them for the cockroaches and rats to scavenge at night. Every discoloured remnant of tattered hosiery, every garish cut and colour of hair, every sweaty-booted or rubber-thonged fungal foot known to the ungentrified inner city passed by. Carnivalesque. The professors of cultural studies were welcome to it. He called up Fullalove and arranged to meet somewhere no less distasteful.

'Still on the payroll of the little pretender?' asked Fullalove.

'Still on the payroll,' said Plant.

'And they pay up?'

'Generally,' said Plant. 'Claudia's away at the moment so it should be less of a hassle.'

'That must be a shock to Scobie's system. How's he coping with the fear of freedom?'

'Nada's moved in.'

'The resurrection of the dead,' said Fullalove. 'Enough to make you believe in the thirty-nine articles. What are they getting up to?'

'She took him off on a binge,' said Plant.

'Oh no,' said Fullalove, 'she didn't.'

'She did.'

'How long?'

'Ten days.'

'Poor old Scobie,' said Fullalove. 'Claudia should never have gone away. If she doesn't come back he'll be fucked. Fucked forever. Fucked by Nada.'

'I thought they were old friends.'

'Oldest trick in the book. Get an old friend to come back from the grave and fuck you. Never fails. Certainly not with

Scobie. He'll be fucked this time for sure. He's done it too often.'

'What's Nada's story?' asked Plant.

'The saddest story, the immortal story,' said Fullalove. 'Nada the unprintable. She gives everyone such a hard time no one can be bothered with her.'

'Scobie seems to be able to.'

'Real people,' said Fullalove. 'As in *Realpolitik*. Publishers, editors, real people of the unreal city. Or vice versa. The destiny that shapes our ends. The multinationals that fuck us over.'

'I've lost you,' said Plant.

'Nada carries on so much that no one will publish her. She always threatens to sue her editor or withdraws the manuscript or changes her mind. So nothing appears. So no one will ever know if she was any good or not. Brilliant, really. Elegant, as they put it. Keep it simple stupid. No one will touch her now.'

'Except Scobie.'

'Oh, Scobie,' said Fullalove. 'Mr. Touch-type. He's a sucker for the Nadas of the world. He's the original octopus, suckers everywhere.'

'He seems to think she's an unrecognized genius.'

'A genius at destruction,' said Fullalove. 'She goes round making chaos and knocking pieces off the board. Thins out the ranks. Like the police and army death squads in the Americas. Killing homeless kids and dissidents.'

'I hadn't seen her quite like that.'

'You should,' said Fullalove. 'You'd better.'

'I thought she was some sort of unreconstructed free spirit.'

'The angel of death,' said Fullalove. 'The grim reaper of the literary purges. There's nothing free about Nada. She's integral to the system. And I don't mean just dealing dope at street level. She's the classic provocateur. Fuelled by her own resentments and a coke habit like an American President.'

'Tell me,' said Plant.

'She's there to get idiots like Scobie to go feral and get themselves counted out. You've got to understand the multinationals. You've got to understand late capitalism. There's not enough room for everyone is what it comes down to. That's why they destroyed me. I was on track to be a media executive till they fucked me over, did I ever tell you?'

'Yes,' said Plant. 'It was terrible. So what were you saying about people like Scobie?'

'Scobie? They don't need him. There's too many writers, too many books, too much product. The system wants a handful of safe stars. Like Hollywood. Like soap powders. So Nada gets Scobie on the skids and he goes animal in public and abuses the arts bureaucrats and abuses his publisher and abuses the media, they knock him off the guest list. He doesn't even have to abuse them. She gets him so stoned he forgets to show, doesn't deliver. So there he is, labelled unreliable. Can't send him to the World Novelists Conference in New Delhi. Unreliable. Might get stoned. Embarrass the state. Diplomatic incident. No, can't afford to risk old Scobie.' He spread out his hands like the Pope giving a blessing. 'See? Perfect. One less name to promote. One less subsidy to dole out. Get some new young thing who's easier to control.'

'Is it that calculated?' said Plant.

'Yes,' said Fullalove. 'It sure is.'

'And Nada knows what she's doing?'

'Who knows what Nada knows?' said Fullalove. 'Does it matter? There's dozens of Nadas fucking around fucking things up. That's why the sixties came to nothing. They all carried on like that. It's like the way the poor prey on each other and loot from each other and do the ruling class's work of destruction on behalf of the ruling class, instead of combining and co-operating against the ruling class. So Nada complains no one publishes her, and instead of using Scobie to get her into print she drags him down too.'

'But why would anyone want to do this?' said Plant.

'Control.'

'Sometimes,' said Plant, 'you sound like something from the sixties yourself.'

'But I saw through it.'

'Ah,' said Plant.

'So they're raging on out there?' said Fullalove.

'They're entertaining Scobie's publisher.'

'Not the ugly Englishman?'

'Bentley.'

'That's him. The unquiet Brit. Visits every year. Get away from the cold weather, don't you know. Comes to harass the natives and do a bit of business.'

'What sort of business?'

'Not publishing. You can be sure of that. He could do all that by fax and e-mail. What needs to be done. Not that much is done. He comes out every year via the Far East. What the Brits call the Far East. Like they call Indians Asians. All flights go to Bangkok. Like all roads used to lead to Rome. Stops off a few days, bit of sex tourism, screws a few under-age kids, gender unspecific, pops up in Chiang Mai as Bent Lee, the crooked Chinaman. You know the story.'

'I don't think I do,' said Plant. 'What's he doing in Chiang Mai?'

'What does anyone do there? Buying and selling drugs. Moving money around, cover for some dirty SAS or SIS or MI one two three four five six seven operation. DEA or DOA or Dies Irae. You name it, he's it. You should read his books.'

'What he publishes?'

'No, the ones he writes. Horrible political thrillers about culling out working-class radicals and disappearing dissidents. The working-class villains all have dirty dishes piled up in the sink. That's how you know they're villains. The upper-class good guys have butlers.'

'So he writes as well as publishes?'

'Not much publishing that I could ever see,' said Fullalove.

Plant took it all impassively. It might all be true, it might not. It might be conscious conspiracy, it might be random ratbaggery. It was all part of the spectacle and he held no opinion on it. But it did cool off any developing desire he might have felt for Nada.

Chapter 17

It was airport duty again for Plant. The grim light of dawn, the windy parking lot, the hubbub of happy relatives, all jostling and pushing and punching each other in the ribs in joyful expectation of smuggled tomato seeds from tomatoes like they used to be.

'Just meet me at six,' Claudia had said when she phoned. 'And don't say anything to Scobie. I want this to be a surprise.'

'I'm sure it will be that,' said Plant.

'You better be,' said Claudia.

He looked round the arrivals hall for Magdalena. No sign of her. Maybe Daddy was staying on. Maybe he should've phoned her to find out. Maybe not. He prepared himself for Claudia, a chauffeur's impassivity, he was going to need it.

Back at the house Plant did not even have to open the door for her. She was out of the car, into the hall and up the stairs before he had lifted the luggage from the boot. He followed as fast as he could. This was something not to be missed. This was the *vérité* a conscientious research assistant could not afford to pass by.

He heard the imperious shout even as he reached the

landing.

'Out!'

He peered into the bedroom. She had flung back the sheets to reveal Scobie and Nada, lying back to back, in grubby old format Penguin t-shirts, *The Big Sleep* and *As I Lay Dying*. Nada reached out to draw the sheets up but Claudia grabbed them and pulled them right off the bed.

'Out! Straight away!'

Scobie struggled to his feet and reached for his teeth in a glass of water beside the bed and his pills on the floor beneath it.

'Not you,' said Claudia. 'You stay here.'

He took his teeth back out, swallowed a couple of pills with the water from the teeth glass, and sat on the edge of the bed, knees together, lips pursed.

'Out!' called Claudia for the third time.

'Lay off a bit,' said Nada. She stripped off her t-shirt, stood there naked. 'Gotta find my clothes,' she said, smiling her most raddled, charmless smile.

'Slut!' said Claudia.

Nada seemed unfazed. Plant had the sense that it was not an unfamiliar scenario for her. Or for any of them for that matter.

Bentley ambled down the corridor in his Thai silk pyjamas.

'Oh, I say,' he said.

Nada wriggled her hips at him. 'Go on then, say it,' she said.

Claudia turned on him before he could say anything.

'You too, out.'

'Good lord,' said Bentley.

'You can't throw him out,' said Scobie. 'He's our publisher.'

'Shut up, Scobie,' said Claudia. 'I'll speak to you later. You,' she said to Bentley, 'get your things and go.'

'Hold on,' said Nada, 'I'll come with you.'

'You can't go with him,' said Scobie.

He stood up in alarm.

'So what are you going to do about it?' asked Nada.

'Nothing,' said Claudia before Scobie could answer. 'Scobie, sit.'

He sat.

'We can share a cab,' said Bentley.

'We can share a hotel,' said Nada. 'You can afford it. Where do you think I'm going to live?'

Bentley was already heading back to his room.

'Call a cab, while I pack, would you?' he asked Plant. 'And then give me a hand with the cases, there's a good fellow.'

'Scumbag,' Nada hissed as she saw Plant. 'You fucking knew, didn't you? You knew she was coming back and you said nothing. I wouldn't even be fucking surprised if you phoned her.'

Plant preserved his impassivity.

Nada stuffed her belongings in a plastic bag and left the bedroom.

'So long, lover boy' she called to Scobie, blowing him a kiss from across the room. 'He's all yours,' she said to Claudia. 'Pubic warts and all.'

Back home Claudia took control immediately. Cleaners were called in and all traces of Nada and Bentley expunged, spilled drinks, dropped ash, clipped nails, scents, smells, traces,

auras, ectoplasms. Scobie complained about the intrusion, the noise, the upheaval.

'Any more from you,' said Claudia, 'and you're in a private hospital.'

'Why a hospital?' whined Scobie.

'To keep you locked up,' said Claudia.

Scobie swallowed a couple more pills in fear of imminent detoxification.

'Now go up to your room and write, damn you,' said Claudia.

'Write?' said Scobie. 'Write what?'

Claudia just looked at him and he shrivelled to ash, a heap of petrified radioactive salt. Plant awaited the order to scoop him up into an urn and deposit him in the Writers' Centre garden of remembrance.

But Claudia still had things for Scobie to do. She pushed him back out on the celebrity circuit. As the windows were washed and the carpets shampooed around her, she blasted her way through a frenzy of media contacts, lining Scobie up for games shows, writers in the pub, community radio, republican rallies, whatever was unable to withstand her.

'There's no point,' said Scobie. 'You only do these things if you've got a new book.'

'Then write one.'

'Claudia, it takes years.'

'So get started now.'

'How can I write if I've got to do all this?'

'Do it and shut up,' said Claudia. 'I want people to know you're still alive. While you still are. You go running around with that toxic little tart and the rumours start everywhere. The only way to kill them is to show you in public. Otherwise

I'd just have you locked up.'

'What for?' wailed Scobie.

'Just shut up, Scobie,' said Claudia. 'You know what for. You just get out there and show your face and prove you can still stand up.'

Talk shows, my favourite classical music, aboriginal reconciliation, rotary, she was remorseless.

'What about the Home Improvement program?' said Scobie. 'Or the Sex Show. I could go on that.'

But this was sotto voce to Plant, while Claudia was busy sliming down the phone lines to get him bookings, and the discount furnishers trampled in with a new mattress and took away the old.

Chapter 18

Scobie sat surrounded by piles of neatly folded suits, shirts, underwear, and shoes.

'How about these?' he asked holding up a pair of polished brown Oxfords as Plant came in.

'Very nice,' said Plant.

'Dead men's shoes,' said Scobie.

Plant looked again. The clothing was all clean and in good condition, but he could see that it was not new. Quality fabrics that had worn well, but that somehow showed their age in the cut, the designs, the lack of the lustre of the pristine.

'You haven't been down the morgue?' Plant asked. He looked yet once more. He couldn't believe it. No, he could believe it. He could believe anything.

'Not yet,' said Scobie.

He took off the Oxfords and tried on a tweed suit.

'The generosity of the seriously rich,' he said. 'That's why they're seriously rich. Never throw anything away. Keep it in the family. This suit could probably be from fabric a hundred years old. The old man probably inherited it from his father or his grandfather. Had it restyled. Or the style might have come back again. What do you think?'

'Could be,' agreed Plant. 'So what happened?'

'Who knows?' said Scobie. 'Claudia's mum just threw all these out. The old man's not coming back. Shacked up with some bimbo in Bohemia.'

'Is this true?'

'No way of telling,' said Scobie. 'Don't say anything to Claudia. She pretends it hasn't happened. Her mother might have taken out a contract. You never know. Got tired of the old codger's carryings on. He probably found another *au pair*. They go ape over them. Leave their wives. Set themselves up in a penthouse. Maybe he lured one away from some other old geyser and the other guy got his mates to kick him down the stairs. That's what they do, millionaires, businessmen.'

He held up a pair of brogues.

'Hardly worn,' he said. 'See the toecaps. That's what they use. Lethal. Those old guys are not to be tangled with.'

A stack of longjohns rested on a chair.

'If there's anything you fancy, try it on,' said Scobie. 'While Claudia's out. She gets possessive about all this stuff but she'll never notice what's gone.'

'It's all right,' said Plant.

'No need to be squeamish,' said Scobie. 'We don't know that he's dead. They claim he's still alive. "But dead to me." That's what she said.'

'Do you want me to look into it?' Plant asked. No chance of reporting back to the old man if he was dead.

'Best not to know the details,' said Scobie.

'If that's what you think.'

'I certainly do,' said Scobie.

He resumed his sifting through the clothes.

'Are you going to keep all this?' Plant asked.

'Have to,' said Scobie. 'Claudia would never let me throw them out. Never have to shop again, think of the savings in time, apart from the money. Anyway, he might come back and want them all back. You can never tell with rich people. That's why they're rich. If it'd been me, I'd have burned them all, and the old man in them. But not rich people. Absolutely loaded and they save every cent.'

Scobie dived around in his shirt tails, trying on trousers, natty blazers, double-breasted business suits, golf shirts, sporty cravats, a kaleidoscope of the displaced boulevards of Central Europe, filaments of fabric floating through the air of the closed room, enveloping it all in a musty miasma of greed and deceit and treachery that outlived mere mortality, Scobie like a bobbing duck on a dirty river, happy as a rat in the sewers of old Vienna.

There was the sound of the front door opening and footsteps down the hall. Claudia came into the room.

'How are you darling?' said Scobie. 'How's your mother?'

'Poor Mummy,' she said. 'We're going to sue.'

'Sue who?'

'The company. We'll take them for everything. Set Mummy up comfortably.'

'She's set up comfortably now.'

'This will give her security.'

'In case he makes another will.'

'There won't be another will.'

'Hidden beneath a kitchen drawer.'

'He never went in the kitchen.'

'What if he leaves everything to that bimbo?'

'There wasn't any bimbo.'

'The *au pair*.'

'We don't have an *au pair*.'

'The one he set up in the flat in the Cross.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' said Claudia.
'Have you had your pills?'

'Couple of dozen,' said Scobie. 'Bopping along. How do you like this suit?'

'It reminds me of poor Daddy.' She lit a cigarette and coughed for a few minutes. It brought some moisture to the corners of her eyes.

'Poor rich Daddy,' said Scobie.

'Try the pin-stripe,' she said. 'You could wear that to the literary awards dinner.'

'They'd think I was the premier,' said Scobie. 'Or one of his crooked cronies. I'd need a signet ring.'

'I'll get you one of Daddy's.'

'And a gold tooth,' said Scobie. 'Could you get me one of his gold teeth? They take them out before they cremate the bodies. Be a shame to lose all that gold.'

'He isn't dead,' she said.

'Give your mother time,' said Scobie.

Chapter 19

Plant had been deputed to wake them at crack of dawn for the literary lunch. It had been Claudia's arrangement. Get Scobie out there in public, keep him off the streets, away from the noxious influence of Nada, get him out there promoting himself.

'There's no point in doing all this publicity without a new book,' Scobie wailed.

'Just do it and shut up,' said Claudia. 'I want people to know you're still alive. You go running around with that poisonous piece and the rumours start everywhere. Now everyone thinks you've been sharing needles with her and you've got AIDS.'

'Could be a good marketing point,' said Scobie. 'Sympathy sales. It's worked for others. Like –'

'Just keep quiet, Scobie. You just get out there and show your face.'

'Just my face?'

'And prove you can still stand up.'

'What for?'

'We've got to keep your name up there,' said Claudia.

'Up where?' Scobie asked.

'In the public eye.'

'The mote in the eye of the storm,' said Scobie, 'the beam in the eye of God.'

'Just shut up and write a talk.'

'I've got nothing to say.'

'Get Plant to write it.'

'Get Plant to give it,' said Scobie.

When the day came Scobie was strangely unresistant. He sat sniffing over a coffee, occasionally swatting at his brow like a flea-ridden chimpanzee, but his psychobabble of complaint had subsided.

Claudia buzzed around. 'Have you got a pen?'

'Yes,' said Scobie.

'Show me.'

He flailed around the kitchen table and found a ball-point.

'Take it.'

'I don't have a pocket.'

'Take it.'

'I don't want it,' said Scobie.

'You'll need it to sign books.'

'I might write down assignations.'

'Not with this audience you won't,' said Claudia, darkly, brightly darkly.

They came out of the lift into the hotel ballroom. A sea of seventy-year-old female heads, blue rinsed, hennaed and blondered, bobbed in front of them, ranked round tables, talking at each other like waves on a shingle beach.

'It's the wrong floor,' said Scobie.

'This is it,' said Claudia.

'I'm not going in there.'

'Yes you are,' said Claudia, gripping his arm and forcing him forward.

The odious Hayseed, buttoned up in his three-piece suit and spotty bow tie, slid across to them on his trail of slime.

'The honoured guest,' he said, all polished teeth and glinting glasses and resentment.

Scobie made a run for it.

'Get him, Plant,' Claudia ordered.

Plant followed him down the corridor and into the toilets.

'I can't do it,' said Scobie. 'Have you seen them? What is it? You said it was a literary lunch. You said it would sell books. These people never read books. Not my books. They'd hate my books.'

'As long as they buy them,' said Plant.

'They won't buy them,' said Scobie. 'People like that never buy books. They come to things like this so they don't have to buy the books. It's a substitute. It's all a substitute. It's just a substitute to do away with literature. Nada was right.'

'I thought she said you were the substitute,' said Plant.

But mention of Nada had jogged Scobie's memory.

'Where's the rest of that coke she had? You still got it?'

Plant passed across a foil-wrapped package.

'Is that all? Have you been getting stuck into it?'

He took out his pill bottle and shook a couple of pills free. He swallowed the pills with water from the tap and snorted the powder up his nose with a ten-dollar note borrowed from Plant.

'Should you mix them?' Plant asked.

'Just a cocktail,' said Scobie. 'No choice, anyway. How else can I go out there? It's not like the poets. The poets aren't interested in literature either but at least all they want to do is read their poems at you. At least you can get a fuck out of it. The poets mightn't be literature but at least they run a reasonable singles' bar. But this, this is like a death camp.'

Hayseed announced the lunches were an ongoing forum for the literary wing of the public intellectuals. But that was only the cover story. It was a meeting place for aimless old folk with a bit of money. If they paid fifty dollars a head in the name of literature they could persuade themselves it wasn't just going out gossiping and getting smashed. The literary was the excuse but they didn't want too much of it. That was Scobie's first mistake. It wasn't what he said. No one was there to listen to what he said. It was that he went on too long.

Anything over seven minutes was too long. Before the end of ten minutes he was supposed to have sat down and shut up and started eating, maybe begun a private exchange on the latest military memoirs reviewed in the odious Hayseed's execrable reviews pages.

But ten minutes was only Scobie's warming up time in his tirade against the literary world. The diatribes of Nada were all too clear. He began with a denunciation of publishers who were all twenty-four-year-old private schoolgirls called Fiona, who knew nothing about books, nothing of the literary heritage. He would phone up his publisher now and they would say, 'What company do you represent?' 'What company?' he would respond, 'I represent myself, I am an author.' 'Oh, not an author,' they would say and hang up.

'Is this the way to treat an author?' Scobie asked. 'We gave

them the only myth they had and they rejected us. Who gets the prizes now? Aboriginals, multiculturals, women.'

If he had stopped at aborigines it would have been all right. There weren't too many of them present. Not a one, indeed. Multicultural was getting a bit problematical. There were a fair few, or at least a blonder few, Middle European widows on their cultural outing. But women, women were ninety-eight per cent of the audience. Complaining about women was inviting trouble.

Complaining about not being given his due in prizes was a mistake too. It came out as self-pitying and that was bad. It sounded like failure. The audience hadn't come to hear failure. They had enough failure at home, their geriatric husbands, their spendthrift children, their delinquent grandchildren. If he hadn't been winning prizes lately it must have been because he was no good or didn't know how to suborn the judges. Either way, no good. A loser. They switched off and began talking to each other. Anyway, he had talked quite long enough, they had sat in quite enough silence.

As the dull susurrus of conversation rose to a hum, Scobie got louder. He knew he was losing it.

'It's the same here,' he said. 'You're like publishers. You're like prize committees. You're like the Australia Council. You've got no interest in literature. You don't even want to listen.'

It may well have been true, all too true, but it was ill judged for the occasion.

'We don't have to listen to this,' said one old lady.

'Hear, hear,' said a chorus of others.

'Why not?' Scobie demanded.

'Shut up,' someone shouted.

'Sit down and eat your dinner,' someone else called.

Someone threw a bread roll.

'Eat that,' a wit called out.

Scobie stood there, stunned, aghast, facing a sea of septuagenarian resistance. He felt in his pocket for his pills and downed a couple with a swig of wine.

'What do you want?' he asked. 'What do you come for? Literature? You don't come for literature. A freak show, that's what you want. The Colosseum, that's what it is. You want to see writers tossed naked to the lions. Naked. I'll show you naked.'

He took off his jacket.

'Exposure, that's what you want. You're like biographers. You hate writers. You want to strip them naked. You want to expose their flaws. I'll show you exposure. I'll show you naked. I'll show you flaws.'

He had his shirt off. He balanced uncertainly, taking off his shoes, his socks.

'I'll show you the bare truth,' he said, taking off his singlet.

There was a crash at one of the tables as someone fell face forward into the dessert.

'A doctor,' a voice called out, 'a doctor, is there a doctor in the house?'

Scobie took out his pill bottle from his trouser pocket.

'Have some pills,' he said, throwing a handful at the audience, 'these'll fix you up.'

The old lady in the dessert had turned blue. People loosened her buttons. The odious Hayseed fished out his mobile phone and called for medical back-up.

'You want the naked truth,' said Scobie. 'Here it is. I've nothing to hide.'

He took off his trousers and underpants and threw them to the lunch tables like a literary Tom Jones.

'Nothing to show either,' heckled one of the ladies.

A couple of hotel staff rushed in with an oxygen cylinder. All eyes followed them as they went to the heart attack victim. Scobie stood naked on the platform, ignored.

'What else do you want? What more do you want?' he called.

He had one last trick.

He reached a hand up to his mouth and took out his teeth.

'How about that,' he lisped. 'Is that enough?'

But the odious Hayseed administering the kiss of death to the heart attack victim, sucking out her last remaining breath in a heaving display of grand passion, was of far more interest to the pensioners. Naked men they had seen enough of. The possibility of return from the jaws of death was of much more pressing concern.

Chapter 20

'That,' said Claudia, 'is it, you little squit.'

Scobie sat in the back of the car, robed in a hotel blanket.

'There's no such word as squit,' said Scobie.

'Don't you argue with me.'

'It's something publishers made up when they weren't allowed to print shit. No one actually says it.'

'I'm saying it and it suits you perfectly, you made-up heap of publishers' turds,' said Claudia.

'Straight home?' asked Plant, chauffeuring.

'No,' shrieked Claudia, 'the Bel Ami.'

'The Bel Ami?' said Scobie. 'Why the Bel Ami?'

'That's where you're going.'

'Why?'

'Because I'm going to get you straightened out.'

'No way!' said Scobie. 'Not the chiropractor again. I'm not having any more bones cracked.'

'That's the least of your worries.'

'They twist your neck like you're a goose for Christmas.'

'I hope they twist yours till you're a deep-freeze cold turkey,' said Claudia.

'Why am I going to the Bel Ami?'

'Because it's a private hospital and I can get you in there straight away. Daddy's a director.'

'It's that detox clinic,' said Scobie. 'Why detox?'

'Another squeak out of you and I'll get you certified as insane and locked up forever.'

'They don't do that any more,' said Scobie. 'They fill you up with drugs and let you out on the streets.'

'Not with you they won't,' said Claudia. 'Any more trouble from you and I'll get you put away in Switzerland if I have to. You'll never get out of a hospital there. No one will ever know where you are.'

'That's banks,' said Scobie. 'You're confusing it with bank confidentiality.'

'Don't bet on it,' said Claudia. 'You break out of the Bel Ami and I'll put you away for life.'

Scobie considered it.

'I can't go in without any clothes.'

'You should've thought of that before you took them off.'

'I didn't know those old biddies were going to souvenir them.'

'They took them off to incinerate them,' said Claudia. 'And only because they weren't able to get to you. They'd have set fire to you if they could have.'

'My teeth,' said Scobie. 'I won't be able to eat without my teeth.'

'They'll put you on a drip,' said Claudia. 'You'll be in deep sleep therapy for three weeks, you won't need them.'

'They can't do that,' said Scobie. 'They kill people doing that.'

'You can have a lobotomy if you prefer,' said Claudia.

'Shit,' said Scobie.

'Squit to you,' said Claudia.

Driving Claudia back to the house Plant began to worry. With Scobie now locked away in detox, would he find himself without a job? Would Scobie be needing a research assistant while he was in the clinic? It seemed unlikely. Of course there was the daily correspondence to attend to, but now Claudia was back she attended to that. Maybe Scobie would find something of interest in the clinic and need a researcher on that, but the prospect of joining him in there had little appeal. Besides, it was enormously expensive. He couldn't see Claudia footing his bill as well. He couldn't see Claudia footing any bill, that was what worried him. If he raised the issue in any way, she was likely to realize that by firing him she could save money. Save money on Plant to pay for Scobie's rehabilitation. If it was rehabilitation. It might just be permanent incarceration. That would be very expensive indeed and would clearly obviate the need for a research assistant ever again.

It was a silent drive. Nothing but sad reflection. In short, had he killed and cooked his golden goose in not tipping Scobie off about Claudia's return and in feeding Scobie the secret stash of coke he'd purloined from Nada before the literary lunch? He'd got himself so far in place he'd knocked Scobie off the board and he wasn't sure that that had been a wise strategy. It would have been better to have kept him there, like a constitutional monarch or a colonial leader, an old style comprador whose strings he could pull. With Scobie deep in detox what role had he left himself?

After a while he registered that Claudia was singularly quiet too. Grief at Scobie's incarceration? He doubted it. She had

slammed him in there with evident relish. If there had been an electric chair, she would have sat him on it. The silence had come later, not from reflecting on the deed itself but on its consequences. Plant experimented with empathy. How would he feel if he were her? It came to him rather suddenly that he would feel much the same way as he felt himself. The golden goose again. There she was, she'd had her artist and now she'd locked him away and who was going to produce the golden eggs now? Where was her role as first novelist's wife if the first novelist was strapped up in a straightjacket unable to write? She could always get him out, of course, but Plant suspected that having got him safely in there, getting him out was not something she would want to do in a hurry. Scobie was going to be doing time, that was for sure.

He tested out her responses on that one.

'Should I take some clothes down for Scobie when we get back?'

'Clothes?' she said. 'No, he won't be needing any in there. And he won't be coming out.'

She didn't even add 'in a hurry' or 'for a while.'

What was needed, Plant figured, as he drove Claudia slowly back to the house, was a request from some newspaper or magazine for something from Scobie. Preferably a series of requests. A think piece or a short story or an excerpt from a work in progress. Something he could write in Scobie's name while Scobie was locked away. And so secure his indispensability.

And it happened. The answering machine was stuffed with calls from journalists wanting to do interviews with Scobie. Claudia played them through.

'There must be an angle we can use,' said Plant.

'What?' Claudia asked.

'Well, if they're so keen, why don't they pay for a piece?' Plant suggested. 'We can't give them an interview.'

'We certainly can't.'

'But if they wanted to buy a "Why I did it", it would be worth it.'

'Would it?'

'Absolutely,' said Plant. 'You can't buy publicity like that. It's impossible to get. This is front-page stuff. Books never normally get that. Now we've got it, it would be madness not to use it.'

'Use it for what?'

'It all sells books,' said Plant.

'Does it?'

He doubted it. He doubted the publishers would have their act together enough to get the books into the shops before everyone had forgotten about Scobie's performance. But it was not for him to say it. Or if it was, he wasn't going to say it. What it was for him to say was that he'd write Scobie's piece.

'I could rough something out,' he said. He put all the winning tentativeness he could muster into the offer.

Claudia got onto the phone and began negotiating.

'Forget interviews,' she told them. 'We don't give interviews. In his own words, or nothing.'

In his own words it was, and Plant began writing them.

It was a quiet evening without Scobie shuffling around muttering or dictating into his tape-recorder. Plant tapped away at the keyboard, formulating Scobie's true confessions.

Claudia sat at the kitchen table going through the accounts. Once in a while she got up and brewed fresh coffee. The record player played restful Bach orchestral suites. Occasionally there would be the sound of a boat on the harbour. Otherwise pure harmony. The order of old Europe relocated. Plant rolled a smoke while Scobie's exclusive printed out, sat back and shared the joint with Claudia as she read through the piece and approved it.

She e-mailed it through to make the morning's paper. It was good, he knew it was good, and she approved. He was relieved. But what choice did she have? Still, he was relieved. She was capable of whimsical judgments, he knew.

But tonight she knew her own mind. She was a woman living her own life, a woman making her own choices, a woman in charge, a creature of the sixties and a collateral of Catherine the Great. Liberation, authority, certainty.

'Stay the night, Plant,' she said.

It was not a request. There was no unbecoming delicacy, no stuttering qualification, nothing of the how lonely I am without Scobie, no plea to help a woman abandoned, nothing at all of that. It was an order.

And Plant, who likewise knew his own mind and had no choice, obeyed.

Chapter 21

Fullalove limped into the pub on crutches.

'They've not only ruined my life,' he said, 'they're trying to kill me.'

'Who?' asked Plant.

'The multinationals,' said Fullalove. 'The Secret Service. Who knows?'

'I thought it might have been the body snatchers again.'

'Who knows?' Fullalove repeated. 'They're all the same people. It's all one corporation. People think there's a difference between cops and robbers but there's not. They're all on the same team.'

A man in blue combat uniform, heavy boots, cropped hair, gun at his belt, came up the bar.

'See,' said Fullalove. 'They follow me everywhere.'

'What uniform was that?'

'Tactical Response Unit. But they're all the same. Different names but all the same.'

'So what happened to you?'

'They knocked me off my bike. Ran me off the road. Tried to kill me.'

'Why would they do that?'

'That's what they do,' said Fullalove. 'That's what they're trained for.'

'What had you done?'

'I've developed these powers,' said Fullalove. 'I saw this police car so immediately I prayed for invisibility. It worked but it was a mistake. They slammed into me. They said they didn't see me.'

'So it was an accident?'

'There are no accidents,' said Fullalove darkly. 'They're out to kill me. Next time I'll pray for protection.'

'Why are they trying to do that?'

'You cross them and they try to kill you. Remember that. If I had one piece of advice to hand on to my kids before I die, which might be any minute, if I had kids, it would be that.'

'What?'

'You cross them and they'll try to kill you. Whatever you say, say nothing. That's my advice if you want to be a journalist.' He took a long drink of his beer. 'So how's the old Scobe, then?'

'He's all right.'

'Not what I heard. I heard he was sick.'

'No.'

'I heard he was locked away.'

'He's just drying out.'

'That's what I heard,' said Fullalove. 'Banged up in the Bel Ami clinic and never going to write again. Not that anyone would notice. Not that it matters. No one cares about books anyway. That's what you've got to realize. It's all token. The books are token. No one reads them. They're just to put people in place and keep others out and it's all run by the media and PR and government subsidies and grants and Foreign

Affairs' funded travel. The books are the camouflage. The writing's irrelevant. It's not like music where you can hear if someone can't keep a tune. It's like abstract expressionist painting, no one knows and no one cares and it's all funded by the CIA. That's why they got rid of representational art, so they could get their people who couldn't draw in place. They prefer it if no one reads the books in case someone realizes how bad they are and says so. That was my mistake, saying so. They don't really care about your politics. They don't care if you're left or right. All that's finished now. All they care is you don't say anything. You say the whole culture's a fraud and a circus and they hate you for life. They need willing tools like Scobie to make it look like they've got a culture. That's what the publicity's for. The publicity's not for the books. They don't want to sell the books. The books are the excuse for the publicity. They've got their chosen people and the publicity's to keep them in the public eye. It's all about control. It's been a neo-fascist counter-revolution since 1978. And it's global. There are Scobies everywhere. And as soon as one packs it in they find another one. It's the same as rock bands and prime ministers. They do their term, then they get rid of them. Like car factories. After five years they're obsolete. Not worth re-tooling. Set up another one in Thailand, Malaysia, China, green fields site, tax concessions. That's the way it works. Globalization. Car plants, writers, politicians, you name it.'

Plant sipped at his low alcohol beer while Fullalove went on. Impassive. Impassivity was the only way with Fullalove. If he had been paranoid like Fullalove he could well have thought Fullalove was setting him up, sent out by ASIO or whoever to get him to respond and to comment and to talk,

to reveal his deepest observations and beliefs and plans and connections and strategies and fears.

But Plant knew enough to have no depths that could be plumbbed, he knew enough to keep all his depths on the surface, transparent. But he did wonder. Was Fullalove an authentic figure of inquiry and opposition, persecuted and blacklisted and driven crazy? Or was he a classic provocateur, an informer, an agent? Who else went on like Fullalove any more? Who else would voice all that, unless they were an agent with protection? Or gone crazy, of course. Or was he maybe an agent who had gone crazy, a dumped and discredited former operative who'd been assigned to Scobie and blown it. Or for that matter, discredited and crazy, was he still on the payroll?

Plant resolved to have no opinion on any of it. But to act nonetheless according to the worst case scenario and give Fullalove a wide berth, contain him somehow, tell him nothing, well, reveal nothing even if that meant telling him some things, to tell him nothing might look like he was hiding things.

Fullalove's paranoia was contagious, already it was affecting him. Maybe that was the purpose of it. He'd avoided shaking hands. Viruses were transmitted by contact, his researches for Scobie's medical novel had told him that. But his aura had been contaminated, his consciousness invaded. Minimal contact was the answer. Zero contact, indeed, would have been preferable, but he needed Fullalove. Fullalove was a useful source of information, ideas, possibilities, contaminated as it all undoubtedly was.

'Poor old Scobie,' said Fullalove. 'So she's locked him away at last.'

'It's only temporary,' said Plant.

'Bullshit it's only temporary. He's had it coming to him. She's been waiting to lay into him. She must have got someone else in mind. Has she?'

'Has she what?' asked Plant.

'You heard,' said Fullalove. 'Got someone else lined up.'

'Not that I've heard.'

'Hear no evil, speak no evil,' said Fullalove, 'you're doing the three monkeys, is that it? There's a Korean proverb about monkeys, too. The monkey dances, the monk gets paid. You should remember it.'

'I'll remember it,' said Plant.

'But she's got you dancing?' said Fullalove.

Plant said nothing.

'Giving her one on the side, is that it?' said Fullalove. 'Simulating Scobie's inimitable style. Slipping into his idiom to slip it into her. The pen is mightier than the sword, but the penis mightier than all of them, is that it? Or have you been turning swords into ploughshares? Doing your bit of ploughing, eh? Share cropping.'

Plant remained silent.

'Out of the servants' quarters and into the servants' entrance, opening up the old serving hatch. No comment, eh? Ever the dumb waiter.'

Plant sat it out.

'Don't worry,' said Fullalove. 'I won't say anything, I'm discreet. I see a lot but I don't say anything. I see things but I just think about them quietly. Like you that time I got beaten up and you just sat in the car watching. Now how do I know you weren't following me? How do I know you weren't waiting there to watch them do me over? How do I

know you didn't arrange it all? So you could take me back to Scobie's and get my job? And then get rid of Scobie and get his missus? How do I know?"

'I guess you don't,' said Plant.

Chapter 22

The phone rang and Plant answered it, the developed habit of Scobie's assistant, covering for Scobie's evasions while Claudia was away. But Claudia was already there on the other phone, the no less, indeed far longer, developed habit of gatekeeper, controller general and lady of the house.

'Is that Mrs. Spruce?' a voice asked.

Plant hung on listening. It might concern him, after all.

'This is the Bel Ami Clinic here. Would you happen to have Mr. Spruce with you?'

'What do you mean do I have Mr. Spruce with me? He's with you.'

'Well,' said the voice, 'apparently he isn't.'

'What do you mean apparently he isn't?'

'He seems not to be here.'

'You mean he's escaped.'

'Well, escaped, we don't think of it in those terms.'

'I do,' said Claudia. 'You were supposed to be keeping him locked up.'

'He was under treatment here.'

'The only way to treat him is to keep him locked up,' said Claudia.

There was a silence. Not even a notional 'Yes, madam.'

'So where is he?'

'It was in relation to that that we were phoning you.'

'So you don't know.'

'At the present time - ' The voice tailed off.

'You better find him,' said Claudia. 'If you've lost him I'll sue you for every cent you've got. He's a National Treasure, do you realize that? You've gone and lost a National Treasure. That's sedition. Treason. You can still be shot for that. You better get the army out and find him.'

She slammed down the phone.

'Plant,' she called, loudly. 'They've lost Scobie. Get the car. We've got to find him.'

'Maybe he's just gone out for cigarettes,' Plant suggested, as they left the house.

'He's got cigarettes.'

'I thought they were prohibited there.'

'I smuggled a carton in,' said Claudia. 'Just so nothing like this would happen.'

'So where do we start looking?'

'The clinic.'

'But if he's not there - ?'

'I want to see for myself.'

Plant started the car.

'There might be clues,' she added.

There were.

They had last seen him when his visitors came.

'What visitors?' asked Claudia.

'A couple of women.'

'Who?' asked Claudia.

'One was older, one was younger. His mother-in-law, I think he said.'

'Mummy!' said Claudia. 'That bitch. Who was she with?'

'Her secretary.'

'She doesn't have a secretary.'

'A younger woman.'

'That bimbo,' said Claudia. 'The fucking *au pair*. Plant, get the car, we're going out there. They've kidnapped him.'

'We don't know that,' said Plant.

'I do,' said Claudia.

'They were simply the last visitors before he disappeared.'

'Exactly,' said Claudia. She dug her mobile phone out of her bag and stabbed at it.

'Who're you calling?' Plant asked.

'Mummy,' she said. 'It's off the hook.'

'Maybe it's busy.'

'It's off the hook,' said Claudia, stabbing the number again.

'Maybe she's sleeping,' said Plant.

'And I know who with,' said Claudia. 'I'll kill her. This time I'll kill her. And the *au pair* with her.'

It seemed an awful waste of an *au pair*, Plant reflected, as he drove Claudia out to kill them.

Claudia let herself into the house.

'Mummy!' she called.

There was no answer.

She climbed up the great staircase, Plant a couple of steps behind. It struck him that she knew exactly where she was going. There was no uncertainty, no surprise in this. She flung open the bedroom door.

They were all there, Scobie in the middle, Mummy one side, the *au pair* the other, propped up against the pillows, Mummy with a drink, the *au pair* with a cigarette, Scobie with both. The room was full of post-coital smoke.

'Get up,' said Claudia.

'Claudia,' said Mummy, arising, baring all. The *au pair* sank beneath the sheets, a counter-motion, seeking concealment.

Pity, reflected Plant.

'Not you, you old slut,' said Claudia.

'Which old slut do you want?' Mummy asked. 'Scobie, she must mean you.'

'Scobie, get out of there,' said Claudia.

Scobie got out of there.

'Where are you taking him?' Mummy asked.

'None of your fucking business.'

'It is precisely my fucking business,' said Mummy, maybe a trifle pointedly. 'You're not taking him back to that prison.'

'I'm taking him home.'

'Home?' said Scobie.

'That prison,' said Mummy. 'He'd do better in detox. It's done wonders for his stamina. You should check him in there more often.'

'Put your clothes on, Scobie,' said Claudia.

'He doesn't have any,' said Mummy.

'I don't have any,' said Scobie.

'What do you mean, you don't have any?'

'He wore mine,' said the *au pair*.

'I had to escape,' said Scobie. 'I was in disguise. I was in a what do you call it?'

'A loose cotton shift, Italian sandals, and a blond wig,' said the *au pair*.

'And panties but no bra,' said Scobie. 'I shaved my legs, too, look.'

'You cock-sucking little cross-dresser,' said Claudia.

'He looked very fetching,' said Mummy.

'You rancid little exhibitionist,' said Claudia. 'Put a blanket round you.'

'There aren't any blankets,' said Scobie. 'Only doonas. It's all European style here.'

'Then get a sheet.'

He reached towards the bed and started to tug at the sheet. The *au pair* modestly held onto it. Plant watched.

'Not those,' said Claudia. 'I'm not taking you home wrapped in my mother's cum.'

'You always were a proud hussy,' said Mummy.

'Get him a clean sheet,' Claudia ordered the *au pair*.

The *au pair* shot out of bed and through the door. She returned elegantly draped in one floral sheet with another for Scobie.

'They match,' said Scobie brightly.

'Get in the car,' said Claudia. 'And don't say anything else.'

'Mum's the word,' he nodded obediently as he went down the stairs.

Plant followed them.

'Come and visit us some time,' Mummy called out to Plant.

As he drove them away from Mummy's mansion, Plant let his mind fondle the future. Scobie had surely done it this time. The house had been so nice with Scobie away, all cleaned up, an excellent place to live in, even nicer than before. With

Scobie locked away permanently it might stay that way, no spilled ash, discarded coffee cups, scattered newspapers, magazines, literary reviews, books, CDs, socks, underpants, teeth. If he could just be contained somewhere. This time it would be detox, certification, eternal incarceration at the least. Surely. The first thing they had to do was update the car. Get rid of Scobie's Wrangler and Claudia's Volvo. Maybe a Mercedes convertible. That would be good. He couldn't see Claudia going for a Maserati. Not yet. But a holiday in St Tropez might change her mind. Remind her of what the rich were driving. Whatever that might be. Plant wasn't sure. And a boat. Boat hire on the Mediterranean would convince her it would be cheaper to buy a boat than hire one. It was absurd to live on Sydney harbour and not have a boat. A powerboat. Oceangoing potential. Nip up to Port Douglas for a holiday. Vanuatu. Bali. Maybe not Bali. You really needed a sailing yacht for those distances, otherwise you had to carry so much fuel. He didn't feel like learning to sail. Though you could hire a crew. That was a possibility. Then the whole world was before them. The Philippines. Thailand. Maybe start with the powerboat and sow the seeds of the sailing yacht.

'Plant,' Claudia snapped, 'what are you doing?'

'Doing?' said Plant. 'Driving.'

'Where to?'

'The clinic.'

'Not the clinic, idiot,' said Claudia.

'Not the clinic,' said Plant. 'Where to then?'

'They can't be trusted,' said Claudia. 'They can whistle for their bill. I'm not letting Scobie out of my sight this time.'

'Darling,' said Scobie.

'Shut up, you,' said Claudia.

'Where to, then?' asked Plant.

'Home of course,' said Claudia. 'Where else?'

They sat in the kitchen, Scobie silent in his sheet, Plant discreetly rolling a smoke, Claudia making coffee. Scobie was the first to speak.

'I'll go and get some clothes,' he offered.

'No you won't,' said Claudia.

'I can't sit around like this.'

'You're not going to,' said Claudia. 'Go upstairs and get into bed.'

'Bed?' said Scobie. 'Which bed?'

'In the bedroom,' said Claudia.

'But it's not bedtime,' said Scobie.

'It is for you,' said Claudia.

'I can't go to bed now,' said Scobie. 'This is like the clinic.'

'That's right,' said Claudia. 'This is exactly like the clinic. Only more so. From now on it's bed for you. You're sick, Scobie, so you're staying in bed. Just get up there.'

He got up there. He muttered and whined all the way upstairs. But he got up there.

Claudia came back with the bedroom key.

'I've locked the little fucker in,' she said.

'What if he climbs out of the window?'

'Then with luck he'll break his neck,' she said.

Plant nodded. He said nothing, but logic surely implied that if Scobie was locked into the bedroom, then he, Plant, was locked out of it.

'He needs more pills,' said Claudia.

'I thought he was detoxing,' said Plant.

'Never again,' said Claudia. 'He's not safe. I'm not having

him run off again. It's better he's pilled up.'

'You reckon?'

'Of course,' said Claudia. 'That's why he was given them in the first place. To keep him under control.'

'Oh,' said Plant.

'What do you mean, oh?'

'I thought he was just a junkie,' said Plant.

Claudia took the joint from his fingers and drew on it.

'He was,' she said. 'That's why I got Daddy's doctors to put him on pills. Cure his habit.'

'I see,' said Plant.

'You don't,' said Claudia, 'but it doesn't matter. Just run down to the doctors' and get a repeat script for him.'

'Doesn't he have to go himself?'

'He's not going anywhere,' said Claudia. 'Just do it. I'll phone and tell them he's too sick to get there.'

'Then they'll probably come out to see him.'

'Not these doctors,' said Claudia. 'They never go and see anyone. Anyway, if they do come out they can give him a shot. Lay him out for a week.'

A week, thought Plant. So it was back to the unsatisfactory flat in the distasteful neighbourhood for him. Fuck Scobie, fuck Mummy, fuck the *au pair*, he reflected.

And so he was back in his unsatisfactory flat in the now quite distasteful inner city. He had grown out of it. The flat, the suburb. He had developed a taste for space, for harbour views, sea breezes, big cars, and he wanted more of them. He wanted more of them than seemed to satisfy Claudia and Scobie. Anything seemed to satisfy Scobie, Scobie might as well have been in Plant's flat for all the notice he took of the

view or use he made of the harbour. Nor did anything impinge on Claudia that much except insofar as it was expensive and inaccessible to the majority of people. They could make so much more of their situation, he could make so much more for them.

He looked at the blue-tacked posters on his walls. Not sourly. He knew enough not to get sour about anything. It was a matter of rising above a temporary disruption until times turned round again. He waited for the great restoration.

And apart from driving back to his flat at night, things were pretty much as they had been before. Scobie, in due course allowed out of bed, would pace around the kitchen and the living room and the study, the walkman hung round his neck, muttering to himself. He called it dictating. Sometimes he would sit there listening to himself. Sometimes he would sit there with the erase button down, returning it all to primal silence. And popping pills. 'Have you had your pills, darling?' Claudia would call out and he would obediently open his bottle and pop one, five minutes after popping one without instruction, prompted by chemical need. Chemical need, Claudia's instructions, and habit kept him solidly pilled up. He was no trouble to anyone. He watched a lot of television. At least the television was always on in the study and the living room and the kitchen. He kept scribble pads on hand beside the armchairs so he could scribble out a phrase or two when he wasn't dictating. When the phone rang Claudia would answer it. Plant did the shopping, driving down to the supermarket and the delicatessen and the patisserie and the chemist.

Chapter 23

'I've discovered my aboriginality,' said Scobie.

'What aboriginality?' asked Claudia.

'My identity,' said Scobie. 'My difference.'

'You're not an aboriginal.'

'You can't say an aboriginal,' said Scobie. 'It's offensive. It's in the official offensive language guidelines put out by the university. You can say an aboriginal person. It's allowed as an adjective. But the noun is offensive.'

'Since when have you been an aboriginal?' asked Claudia.

'Since when have I been aboriginal?' Scobie corrected. 'Since I was stolen from my mother at birth.'

'You don't look a bit aboriginal.'

'That's the tragedy of it. The iniquity. It's a white man's conspiracy to present me as a white man. That's why they stole me.'

'So?' said Claudia.

'So,' said Scobie, 'I've discovered my pride.'

'You're a fucking lion, too?'

'Goanna,' said Scobie. 'That's my totem.'

'Totem?' said Claudia. 'I thought that was an American Indian idea.'

'Goanna's aboriginal,' said Scobie.

'An Arawak word, actually,' said Plant.

'It's all the same,' said Scobie. 'The native peoples of the world. I'm one of them. I'm going to go to that native voices conference in Canada. Represent Australia. They need a quality representative.'

'Who told you you were aboriginal?' asked Claudia.

'You know how I found out?' said Scobie. 'There was this blackfellow in detox. He was an alcoholic. And he told me the reason he was an alcoholic was he was aboriginal. The doctors had told him. Aboriginal people are like Chinamen, they said, they don't have a certain enzyme that copes with alcohol. You go animal. You go alcoholic. So I realized that was my problem. I was aboriginal.'

'Maybe you're a Chinaman,' said Claudia.

'No, I'm aboriginal,' said Scobie. 'Not that I've got anything against the Chinese.'

'You weren't in for alcoholism, anyway,' said Claudia.

'But I could have been,' said Scobie. 'If I'd been drinking I could have been. That's why I don't drink. It's the missing enzyme.'

'You're full of shit, Scobie,' said Claudia.

'There you are,' said Scobie. 'Classic racist response. You identify brown with shit.'

'Yellow shit,' said Claudia.

'Still racist,' said Scobie. 'This is what I've had to suffer all my life as an aboriginal person.'

'Bullshit,' said Claudia.

'Treated like an animal, see,' said Scobie. 'Bullshit, cowshit, dogshit.'

'How could you have suffered all your life when you've

only just discovered you're aboriginal?'

'That's the way it is,' said Scobie. 'People are so unkind. They sense it.'

'Take a pill,' said Claudia.

'But now my time has come,' said Scobie, taking two. 'It's perfect. At a turning point in my creativity, I discover new sources within me. I can draw on my heritage. Return to my roots. The dreamtime. The songlines. Secret men's business. It'll be a bestseller. This is what everyone's waiting for. They need it. They're desperately waiting for it. The great aboriginal novel. And I can provide it. I've already written it in my dreaming. I just need to write it down. If I decide to write it down. I might keep it oral. Just do a CD. That would be more authentic.'

'Where did you get all this from?' Claudia asked.

'I told you, I met this tribal elder.'

'Where?'

'Drying out.'

'There weren't any tribal elders in the Bel Ami. You know how much it costs?'

'It was a vision. I had a dream. He took me on a spiritual journey. I communed with the spirit of this dead novelist. He sang the songlines to me. He gave me my destiny.'

'An aboriginal novelist?'

'Upper-class Welsh,' said Scobie.

'You're full of shit, you know that?'

'It's a great story,' said Scobie.

And he stuck to it. He sent Plant off to buy everything on aboriginality in the bookshops and to borrow from the libraries what wasn't in print. Instead of Elton John, the house resonated to didgeridoo recordings, as Scobie

saturated himself with his heritage.

'This is ridiculous,' said Claudia. 'He doesn't know anything about aborigines.'

'That's never stopped anyone else from claiming to be one,' said Plant.

'But he's a fraud.'

'He's not alone in that,' said Plant. 'What's one more?'

'But he'll get exposed.'

'I doubt it,' said Plant. 'But even if he does, so what? Getting exposed never damaged anyone else's career. It's the Australian way to success. Plagiarism, false pretences, it's the way to honours and a literary pension. They need him.'

'You make it sound like the whole culture's a fraud. You sound like Fullalove.'

'Fullalove has his points,' said Plant. 'But I wouldn't want to sound like him.'

'Well, be more positive.'

'I am positive,' said Plant. 'Totally positive. I think it'll be a great book. Bentley will love it. Everyone will love it. It'll sell millions.'

'If he ever writes it,' said Claudia. 'He's a ruin.'

'He'll write it.'

'And what if he doesn't?'

'I'll write it,' said Plant.

'You? How can you write it? You're no more aboriginal than I am.'

'I'll have a dream,' said Plant.

Body parts had given way to penis grafts and penis grafts gave way to aboriginality, but nothing was abandoned.

'It all connects,' said Scobie. He had had a cosmic vision of integration in detox. He could see how it all fitted together. It would make a sensation. Aboriginal baby farms out on the reservations. Breeding hearts and lungs and kidneys for transplants for white folk. Flying the parts into Sydney hospitals in private jets. Refrigerated containers. Secret landing strips.

'They build these amazing hospitals out in the bush. Way out. Everyone thinks it's to improve aboriginal health. What a joke. It's like Haiti. Where did they first discover AIDS? In a hospital in Haiti. Makes you wonder. Amazing they had such sophisticated hospitals in Haiti that could identify an unknown virus. In the forefront of health care, Haiti. They were breeding it there, obviously. That's what Fullalove reckons. Germ warfare. Spreading it across to Cuba from these special hospitals there. Practising on the blacks so they could introduce it into Africa and wipe out the Africans so they could get all the African mineral resources.'

'Is that so?' said Plant.

'Yes,' said Scobie. 'There are these high-tech hospitals out in the Never-Never. And they chop up the aborigines for body parts. It's like South Africa. They did the first heart transplants in South Africa because they could get lots of cheap black bodies to experiment on till they got it right. No questions asked about black bodies. So that's what they're doing out in the Never-Never.'

'And what happens is this nurse decides to save this aboriginal baby. And hide it in the bull-rushes. And it's found by this white couple who can't have children. They're on holiday. In a four-wheel drive. And they steal it and take it back to Sydney and bring it up as their own. That's where I

use my own story.'

'Your own story?' asked Plant.

'It's always best to use your own experience if you can,' said Scobie. 'Gives it authenticity. *Verité*. You know.'

'Yes,' said Plant, 'I know. But your story?'

'That's what happened to me,' said Scobie. 'I was a stolen baby.'

'Really?'

'Pretty much.'

'Found in the bull-rushes?'

'Amazing, isn't it?' said Scobie.

'Absolutely archetypal,' said Plant.

'I didn't know we had bull-rushes in Australia,' said Claudia.

'They call them something else,' said Scobie.

'Why don't you look aboriginal?' asked Claudia.

'The nurse was white,' said Scobie. 'She got pregnant to this warrior. And she couldn't bear the thought of her baby being used for body parts. That's why she hid it. Me. What do you reckon? Reckon it will sell?'

'I think it's beautiful, darling,' said Claudia.

'But will it sell?'

'Of course it will, darling,' said Claudia. 'That's what's so beautiful about it.'

'Good one, then,' said Scobie. 'It saves wasting all that body parts stuff.'

'And it's so relevant, darling,' said Claudia.

'Yeah,' said Scobie.

'What about the malpractice?' Plant asked.

'What malpractice?'

'The malpractice plot,' said Plant. 'I thought you were

turning the body parts plot into a malpractice plot. Doctors and nurses.'

'Oh that,' said Scobie. 'That's easy. We keep the malpractice. It's all malpractice. This doctor gets sent to this secret hospital in the desert because it's the only place that will take him on after the malpractice suit when he sews on the wrong penis. No problems. They're all malpractitioners, it's staffed entirely by people there have been malpractice suits against, they set up these doctors, they file malpractice suits against them so they can get them into this desert hospital, they target all these specialists with body parts skills, they send chicks to set them up and charge them with malpractice so they can be sent out to the desert to cut up aboriginal body parts. Otherwise they couldn't get anybody to do it. Not anybody any good. They all want to work in Sydney, the good ones, no one wants to go out to the desert. Except people of aboriginal descent like me. That's the plot.'

'The plot,' said Plant.

'Yes, it starts with this writer discovering his aboriginality and he goes back to the desert, finds his tribe, and they welcome him back as a blood brother and there's all this secret men's business, and then he notices this amazing high-tech hospital with a landing strip. That's how it begins. That's the autobiographical bit.'

'What autobiographical bit?' asked Claudia.

'When I go back to the desert.'

'When did you ever go back to the desert?'

'Every night,' said Scobie. 'Every night in my dreams.'

It was a great plot but there was no evidence that Scobie was writing it. He chanted into the walkman along with

the didgeridoo recordings, but nothing ever appeared for transcription. The chanting became more rhythmic every day. It could have been an oral epic, it could have been disco music, it could have been self-hypnosis. Whatever it was, there was nothing to show for it. Nothing on the record, nothing in print. But Scobie himself had begun a gradual transmutation. He went around bare-footed now, his teeth permanently out, his brow wrapped in a red rag, his hair and face powdered with a grey ash-like substance.

'What's that on your cheeks?' Claudia asked.

'Dunno,' said Scobie. 'Some sort of ashes.'

'Where did you get it?'

'It was in an urn on the doorstep. Parcel delivery. Your mother sent it.'

'Mummy? What did she say?'

'She wasn't there. She just sent a note. "Ashes to ashes," she wrote. "So much for your Father. You may as well have them. No use to me".'

'I don't believe you,' said Claudia.

'Nobody ever believes the black man,' said Scobie.

Claudia kept up the pill level remorselessly. The one way she knew to keep him from going walkabout with Nada or Mummy or Magdalena was to keep him in a permanent state of altered consciousness, a sort of suspended animation, just a rhythmic muttering as he mumbled away in his chair, too legless even to pace the house.

And Plant, what could he say? He wasn't hired for medical advice, he wasn't the resident toxicologist. It wasn't for him to confront malpractice. He'd finished with the documents of malpractice. Now he read through the ethnographic literature

and the observations of nineteenth-century missionaries. He acquainted himself with the material. He familiarized himself with the settings. He jotted down a few plotlines for Scobie's songlines. When the time came, when the deadline loomed, he would be ready.

Chapter 24

'Stay the night,' Claudia instructed Plant.

Scobie was didgeridooing away in the study, the television was exuding crap, the wind was howling through the rigging of the yachts moored on the harbour.

'I've put a full size bed in the guest room.'

'Full size?' said Plant

'A double,' said Claudia. 'I traded in the old single.'

Not a king size, Plant registered. Cheap as ever.

'I thought you'd be pleased,' Claudia said.

'Oh, I am,' said Plant.

So he stayed.

Claudia joined him in the middle of the night.

'What about Scobie?' Plant asked.

'I gave him a couple of sleeping pills,' said Claudia. 'He's off in the dreamtime.'

'Screwing some black sheila,' said Plant.

'I'll kill him if he is,' said Claudia.

'Purely in the imagination,' said Plant.

'That makes no difference to me,' said Claudia.

Plant believed her.

Bentley flew back in. There was a peremptory e-mail, the usual instruction to pick him up at the airport.

'Let him get a cab,' said Claudia.

'I don't mind,' said Plant. 'It's best to keep him on side.'

'Well, he can't stay here,' said Claudia.

'There's the spare room,' said Scobie, looking up from his didgeridooing.

'Plant's in the guest room,' said Claudia.

'Well, they can share a bed,' said Scobie. 'Everyone else does.'

'What do you mean by that?' Claudia asked.

'It's a native peoples' custom,' said Scobie. 'In Nepal grown men always share a bed with their mother when they visit.'

'Let him book into a hotel, I'm not his mother,' said Claudia.

'What's he doing here anyway? This isn't when he usually comes. He's only just been here.'

What he was doing was fleeing the country. The old country. Nada had followed him to England and when he kicked her out she filed a breach of promise action against him.

'Thought it best to leave town,' he said, as Plant picked him up at the airport.

'Wouldn't it be best to defend yourself?' Plant asked.

'Indefensible,' said Bentley. 'Leave it to the barristers. They made it clear I wouldn't come out well under cross-examination. Never have. So the lure of the East. Business calls. As indeed it does. We've slotted Scobie in for September. All we need now is the manuscript.'

'Ah,' said Plant.

'It's like that, is it?' said Bentley.

'It will be a fascinating book,' said Plant.

'But has he written it?'

'Well, not all of it.'

'Any of it?'

'I can tell you the outline.'

'We have a problem here, is that what you're telling me?'

'Could be,' conceded Plant.

'I'll have a word with him.'

'It may be a bit tricky,' said Plant. 'He's discovered his aboriginality.'

'Aboriginality?' said Bentley. 'Interesting move. I suppose once you've been a National Treasure and a Republican there's not a lot else left.'

'He's begun renouncing white men's words lately.'

'No problem,' said Bentley. 'I'll just shout at him. They understand English if you shout at them. Take me by there on the way to the hotel.'

'It's not really on the way,' said Plant

'No matter,' said Bentley. 'Take me there all the same.'

Scobie sat on the kitchen floor, his toothless mouth blowing into the didgeridoo which he clasped in his bare feet. An ochre rag was wrapped around his brow, his hair and face were dusted lightly with ash, a bottle of beer was on hand beside him.

'Scobie,' Bentley greeted him expansively.

Scobie carried on blowing, giving no sign of recognition or acknowledgment.

'It's Bentley, darling,' said Claudia. She stood there graciously, like a first lady prompting the atrophied mind of a president.

'Loved your photo from the literary lunch,' said Bentley.
'Loved your piece.'

'Never wrote it,' said Scobie. 'Whitefellas took my name like they took my land and took my spirit.'

'It read well all the same,' said Bentley. 'No worries as long as they spell your name right.'

'Not my name,' said Scobie.

'How's the book coming along?' Bentley asked.

'No book,' said Scobie. 'Secret men's business. No book. Can't be written down. Can't be printed. Can't be published. Only told to initiates.'

'Oh, I say,' said Bentley, 'that's a bit severe, isn't it?'

'No more books,' said Scobie.

'Surely not,' said Bentley.

'No more words,' said Scobie.

He withdrew to silence like Ezra Pound in his cage.

Bentley sat it out for a while but Scobie would offer nothing more.

'He's been very stressed,' said Claudia, 'haven't you darling? Have you had your pills?'

She went off in search of a new bottle.

'How about a spot of lunch?' Bentley suggested to Plant while she was out of the room.

'I thought we might go to the Brasserie but it's a bit public. A bit literary, don't you know. All the wannabees. And all those tired old neverwuzzies. And the dreadful drunken dyke publishers. They may not be dykes, of course, even worse. Just big and brash and butch.' Bentley shuddered. 'I'm with old Orwell on this, a girl should be shaped like a boy, don't you think? Slim and short-haired and so on. I like

a little elegance in a woman, don't you? Don't always want to be banging around in the scrum with all those beefy types. Australia's all very well but I can't imagine living in it, can you? Well, I suppose you must, mustn't you? No, let's give it a miss. Bit pricey, anyway. Somewhere quiet. Where we can have a private chat.'

He settled on the Hellenic club. Plant parked the car by the old, original nineteenth-century university building and they walked through Hyde Park, past the war memorial, the derelicts, the back-packers eating out of paper bags as the Egyptian ibises prowled amongst them, vicious probing beaks at the ready.

'They remind me of literary agents,' said Bentley. 'I wonder if you could eat them. Some enterprising chap was catching the pigeons in Trafalgar Square and supplying them to restaurants.'

'We'll have the house retsina,' Bentley said to the waiter, confidentially, in the way he had of bestowing favour and privilege, the privilege of serving him.

'Love these places,' said Bentley. 'Been coming here for years. I remember when the dear old reactionaries from the *Bulletin* and the *Telegraph* used to eat here. One of these places. They'd have their window seat. Hard to get a window seat in those days. The young hopefuls used to watch them from across the room. Hoping they'd choke on a fish-bone and leave the world a better place.'

They ordered. It was a serious business that had to be gone through before Bentley got down to business. He ordered tzatsiki and taramosalata as shared starters and lamb casserole for himself. Plant worked through the menu and assembled a mixture of vegetable dishes, eggplant with garlic

sauce, dolmades, fried haloumi cheese, spanakopita.

'Tell me,' Bentley asked, 'is Scobie up to it?'

'Up to it,' said Plant, reflectively.

'Is he slipping? His sales aren't good. Is he a lost cause?'

'Ah,' said Plant. 'Aboriginality could be a good cause.'

'That last episode. In his birthday suit on the front page of the *Australian*. Useless little prick, why didn't he wait till he had a book ready before he did that? Looked very fetching. Great publicity. But no book to go with it. Nice piece he said he didn't write about it, mind you.'

'Did you like that?' said Plant, enthusiastically.

Bentley marked it, the enthusiasm.

'I'm surprised Scobie got it together to write it, the state he must have been in,' he said.

'Well,' said Plant. 'It was difficult. Claudia had him locked up in detox.'

'Ah well,' said Bentley, 'whoever did it did a good job.'

'Thank you,' said Plant.

'Did he get out of detox with his brain intact?'

'He's quieter,' said Plant.

'So, next question. Will he deliver?'

Plant stayed silent for that one.

'What can we do? No point planning on publishing him if he can't come up with the goods.'

'I see,' said Plant.

'Can't think that detox was the answer myself. Probably dried him up for ever.'

Plant shook his head, a bit this way, a bit that.

'It's safe to speak,' said Bentley. 'I'm not taping us.'

Plant smiled. Wanly. Silently.

'Let me be frank,' said Bentley.

Plant didn't believe him for a moment, but he let him pretend all the same.

'What I want to know is, is his number up? He's had a good run. But is he played out? We've made an investment in Scobie. Put a lot into building him up. It doesn't come cheap. Development costs, you know. Salting the mine. We need to get our money back. Otherwise the accountant chappies start asking questions. Looks bad. Bad for me, anyway. And the way I look at it, what's bad for me is bad for the company. It was all right when it was other people's money. But this management buy-out makes it all a bit different. Serious stuff these days.'

He looked out at the park.

'Used to be a race course.'

'Really?' said Plant.

'In the early days of the colony. They turned it into a park later. Didn't you know that?'

Plant didn't. But Bentley did. Bentley the cosmopolite, knowledgeable in the secret histories of world cities, or at least their race courses.

'We need a contingency plan. Scobie's always been a problem. Unstable sort of chap. Lot of writers are. It won't be the first time we've been let down. If he's gone off the rails, what do we do? You're his locum, aren't you? Sort of? Can you deliver?'

Plant hesitated.

'What it comes down to, the bottom line, is, if Scobie can't complete, could you finish off the new book?'

Plant looked serious. Reliable. Sound.

'Just rough and ready. We can do all the grammar and continuity and stuff in the office. Spell-check it. Surprising the

chaps we do that for. As long as they can give us the narrative, we can smooth down the rough edges and finish it off. Fiona's good at all that. Finishing school stuff.'

Plant looked across at the war memorial. Twenty million dead in the first world war, fifty million in the second. Plus a few more for Korea and Vietnam and Afghanistan and Iraq.

'You don't have any problem with that?'

'I don't think so,' said Plant.

'Good,' said Bentley.

'Though - '

'Here we go.'

'I'm not sure how much he's actually written of the new book.'

'Now you tell me,' said Bentley. 'Has he written anything at all?'

'Oh yes. He began it.'

'Began it. What you're telling me is that there's nothing there.'

'Bits and pieces.' said Plant.

'Useless little runt,' said Bentley. 'All the effort we've put into that name. Can't launch a new one now. Not these days. Too hard. Death of the author and all that stuff. No new names any more. Takes two or three books to get it up to that level. Could all be dead by then. Bankrupt. Something terrible. Cash in hand is my motto. Get it while you can.'

He swung back to Plant.

'We've got him slotted in for September.'

'That soon.'

'Can you deliver in time?'

Plant poured himself more retsina, sipped it.

'All right,' said Bentley, 'what will it take?'

'I probably could,' said Plant.

'But?'

'But I hadn't really seen myself as a ghost writer.'

'More a research assistant.'

'No, more a real writer.'

'A real writer,' said Bentley. 'Not exactly sure what that would be.'

'A writer in my own right.'

'Still a bit problematical but I think I get the drift.'

'That manuscript I gave you.'

'Ah, yes,' said Bentley.

'What did you think?'

'Think?' said Bentley. 'What did I think? Can't recall, to be absolutely honest. I'll tell you what I think now, though.'

'Yes?'

'If you finish this one for Scobie and it does all right, we can put out this masterpiece of yours as his next. If it's any good. Assuming he's played out and can't write his own. Which from all you tell me he is.'

'Why under Scobie's name?'

'The only way. The money will be better. Real money. The name's known. No problem getting it into the shops.'

'Well,' said Plant, 'it wasn't what I planned.'

'It's not what any of us planned,' said Bentley. 'But look at it this way. It's a sure way in. Publication guaranteed. We'll give you a two-book contract. And real money. Now where else are you going to get that? Who's ever going to start you off? You'd never even get past the lobby of anyone else. You don't want to publish here. Not in Australia. Anyway, you would have if you could have, wouldn't you? True? True. With this you get straight into London and New York. I'll

order another carafe while you think about it.'

'It might seem a bit different from Scobie's other stuff.'

'Change of direction. New creative drive. In tune with the present. No problem.'

'Scobie mightn't –'

'Scobie won't even notice. We'll fix Scobie.'

'It's just that, using his name –'

'It's not his name, anyway,' said Bentley. 'We made it up for him. Can't remember what the little bugger used to be called. Something unmemorable. The name's not a problem, we own it.'

'Well,' said Plant.

'We need something now,' said Bentley. 'Don't ask why. We had a screw up along the way. You finish off Scobie's book for September and we'll do your masterpiece next year.'

'Have you read it?' asked Plant.

'No problems. Just keep delivering. I'm sure we'll love it.'

'And if you don't?'

'There's always an opening for a good butler,' said Bentley.

Chapter 25

'We need to think about the launch,' said Claudia.

'I'm not sure a launch is such a good idea.' said Plant.

'We have to have one.'

'Do we need one?'

'You can't publish a book without a launch,' said Claudia.

'Why not?'

'Not Scobie's. He'll expect one.'

'He won't even notice. Tell him he's had one. He won't remember.'

'His public expects one.'

'The public doesn't usually get to a launch. It's just cronies and media.'

'But they hear about it through the media.'

'Sometimes,' said Plant.

'We'll make sure they do.'

'Depends on what you want them to hear. Get him to take his clothes off and we'll get the front pages again.'

'We're not having anything like that,' said Claudia.

'How are you going to prevent it? Not invite him to his own launch?'

'We have to invite him. People are already talking. We've

got to show them he's still all right.'

'He's not,' said Plant.

'And that he isn't locked away.'

'Just a recluse.'

'Yes, a recluse.'

'And we keep him a recluse,' said Plant. 'So he doesn't start talking to people in public.'

'Yes.'

'But we need to have him there so he's seen.'

'Yes.'

'Seen but not heard.'

'Yes.'

'But not seen too much of. Not stripped off.'

'Don't keep bringing that up.'

'We need to bring it up.'

'Why?'

'As an awful warning.'

'Of what?'

'Of what he might do again.'

'We just have to keep him under control,' said Claudia.

'Pilled up but not too pilled up,' said Plant.

'I'll take some blankets with us,' she said.

The mournful groan of the didgeridoo sounded from the attic.

'Couldn't we get him an electric one?' said Plant.

'An electric blanket?'

'A didgeridoo. With earphones. So he could hear it and we could be spared.'

'It keeps him occupied,' said Claudia.

'Maybe he could give a recital,' said Plant.

'Do you think?' said Claudia.

'No,' said Plant.

'So what do we do?'

'What we do,' said Plant, 'is have a media event.'

'That dreadful literary lunch was a media event,' said Claudia. 'It was all over the papers.'

'I thought you said never to mention it.'

'Except as a warning.'

'I've heeded the warning,' said Plant. 'We have a controlled media event. For a start no drinks. No more drunken aggro old ladies.'

'No drinks? How can you have a book launch with no beer? It sounds so un-Australian.'

'Easy. It's been done before. You just don't serve any. That way nobody gets drunk, nobody gets aggressive, nobody gets to talk with Scobie.'

'What sort of launch is this?' said Claudia.

'A media event,' said Plant. 'It's for television. We don't want shots of people getting pissed. It looks bad. Turns off middle Australia. Never be photographed with a drink or wearing a funny hat. First thing they tell politicians.'

'So what do we have if there aren't any drinks?'

'Think of it as a press conference,' said Plant. 'Think of the money we'll save.'

'That's true,' said Claudia.

'Instead of wasting money on booze we'll use it for publicity.'

'People will object, though.'

'They won't know.'

'They'll see there are no drinks when they arrive.'

'They'll imagine they will be served at the end. So they'll sit obediently through the press conference and wait.'

'What happens after that?'

'Someone stands up and says Scobie will be signing books over this way and the exit is over that way. *Finito!*'

'They'll be mad.'

'Who'll be mad? The usual cockroaches on the luncheon circuit? Who cares? It's the television footage that counts. The current affairs programs. The book show. Maybe even the news if it's a quiet day.'

'We shouldn't have a small reception afterwards?'

'And annoy the people who aren't invited? Or invite everyone and spend a fortune? Anyway, we've got to keep Scobie away from people. As long as he's signing books he'll be all right. You can sit next to him and see off any trouble. Then we get him home. Couple more pills. And so to bed.'

They hired the Opera House. Or a room of it. A National Icon for a National Treasure. They worked on the guest list for weeks. Celebrities. Every novelist they could think of. Dramatists. Travel writers. And a few poets. Scobie's peers. All there as backdrop.

'Why her?' complained Claudia. 'She's a bitch. Why him? Scobie hates him.'

'They're recognizable faces,' said Plant. 'We need them for the cameras. The cameras will go up and down the aisles picking out faces that are known. Think of it on television. All these stars turned out for Scobie. What a power trip. Great publicity angle.'

'We need real stars then,' said Claudia. 'Rock stars.'

They invited one. Claudia knew his manager. Then they ran the story in a gossip column. Rock star fan of Scobie Spruce. Amongst the glitterati who will be attending the by-invitation-

only celebrity event.

Except it wasn't by invitation only. They tied the launch in with a regular Friends of the State Library meeting, tickets on sale to members and the public. That way they could be sure of getting a basic audience so the television cameras didn't pan across empty seats. Scobie's peers got free tickets. There was no way they would ever pay, but something free would always lure them.

'We want the place packed,' said Plant. 'Then we sell books. The free list won't buy books. They never do. They expect free copies. Stuff that. But the public will buy them if Scobie signs them. So we sell tickets to the public. We make it look like an exclusive event, then they'll buy tickets. And if we get a good audience we'll get good sales and that will keep Bentley sweet for the next book.'

'The next book?' said Claudia. 'What next book? It was hard enough getting this one out of him.'

'No worries,' said Plant. 'That's all under control.'

'How can we be sure people will buy the book?' said Claudia.

'We hire them,' said Plant. 'We hire a dozen people to start the queue. Once there's a queue everyone will follow.'

'We have to pay them?'

'We need them anyway,' said Plant. 'They'll double as security. Bentley knows some SAS types who moonlight these sorts of jobs. We don't want any more mad old ladies hurling out abuse. One word out of them and they're nobbled.'

'How?'

'Chloroform. Then they're carried outside. Fainted with the excitement. We'll have the security people strategically placed

through the hall. I'll point out obvious troublemakers to them as soon as they come in. People like Fullalove and Nada.'

'You're not inviting them.'

'No, we've screened the guest list. This is for people who pay to come in.'

'So what are we charging?'

'Enough to keep out people like Fullalove and Nada,' said Plant.

It would all have gone to plan except for Tuscan Bayes' exposé. The morning of the launch the loathsome Hayseed continued his books pages vendetta against writers with an intimate profile of Scobie. Bayes had done a background piece, discovered, or got somebody to discover, some birth records, refuted the aboriginality, alleged that Scobie was beyond words and that the whole book was written by someone else. Collusion between author, pseudo-author, and publisher.

Plant found it. He was up early, brewing the coffee to get them on the road. He sat there reading it, wondering what to do, how to tell Claudia. Then the phone rang and Bentley did it for him.

'It's terrible,' said Claudia. 'We'll have to cancel. We can't go on.'

'What did Bentley say?'

'He's coming over.'

'Great stuff,' said Bentley, waving the paper at them as he came through the door. 'Worth millions. Nothing like a good fraud to sell books. We might have to disown someone, of course. Scobie. Plant. Toss them overboard. One or the other. Shock. Regret. That sort of thing. Print a new edition with a disclaimer. As soon as this one's sold out, which shouldn't be

long. Or we could just re-jig the attribution. By Scobie Spruce as told to Keith Plant. Or maybe by Scobie Spruce as told by Keith Plant. Something like that. Should go splendidly with all this denunciation. And a new edition will jog the publicity along. Ought to keep us solvent for another year. Fix up the blurb. Make sure it says it's his spiritual identification with the aboriginal he's discovered. Family of man. That sort of thing. Take out anything too specific. Then Bob's your uncle. We'll follow it up with Plant's masterpiece. Bill it as by the man who was Scobie Spruce. Or the man who wasn't Scobie Spruce. Think about that. Pity that Scobie never adopted you. He still could I guess. Then we could call you Scobie Spruce Jr. or something. Son of Scobie Spruce. How about that? Scobie Spruce meets the Wolf-man. We'll have to work on it but there's an angle there.'

He went through their strategy for the launch.

'Of course Scobie uses a researcher. All serious novelists do. This isn't a trivial matter of making things up. This is infotainment. This is scholarship. This is fact. This is quality fiction.'

'As for who wrote it, Scobie's researcher is so attuned to Scobie he took dictation telepathically. The sensitive Plant.'

'I think that's going a bit far,' said Plant.

'They'll love it,' said Bentley. 'It's like Laura and Voss. Literary and Australian. Can't get more Australian and literary than Patrick White. Pity he wasn't called Black, but you can't have everything.'

'I still think it's going too far.'

'It's an angle,' said Bentley. 'Give them something for talk-back radio. Everyone phones up and talks about their telepathic experiences. Can't lose. It's a nation of telepaths.'

The launch was packed full.

'Imagine how this will look on television,' said Bentley. 'Not an empty seat. Not a missing celebrity.'

Scobie mumbled his way through a few paragraphs. He stood there in one of Daddy's pin-striped suits, a new red rag around his brow, muttering into the microphone. The audience took it for a while. Then someone waved a copy of Bayes' indictment in the air. Scobie responded.

'Racism,' he said. 'You're all a bunch of racists.'

'Perfect,' said Bentley. 'They'll love that. It's what they've come to hear. Liberal guilt. Lashings of laceration. Back to the good old convict days.'

'First of all you try genocide and kill us off,' said Scobie. 'Then you deny our right to exist by saying we're not aboriginal. Next thing there'll be compulsory blood-testing and scientists saying there is no such thing as black blood, these people don't exist, exterminate them.'

It was ingenious but the questions still persisted.

What tribe? What people? Where was he from?

'Is there a doctor in the house?' Scobie asked. 'Do you want to do a DNA test now? My credentials? You want to see my credentials. I'll show you my credentials.'

'No,' said Claudia, 'stop him.'

'Let him go,' said Bentley, holding her down with his ex-commando's grip. 'It's great television. I called CNN. It'll go round the world.'

It did.

Scobie divesting himself of white man's clothes, white man's shoes, white man's teeth.

Mummy and the *au pair* shouted encouragement from the

front row.

'Get 'em off, Scobie.'

'Plant,' said Claudia, 'where are the blankets? Cover him up.'

'Wait till the cameras have got the shot,' said Bentley.

Plant brought out the blanket from beneath his chair in readiness. Scobie saw it and gave an impressive scream of terror.

'No blankets,' he said. 'That's how you killed us before with infected blankets.'

He pushed Plant to the ground, kicked Bentley in the groin, and streaked down through the audience to the back of the hall.

'Smallpox,' he shouted. 'They've put smallpox in the blankets.'

The audience rose and surged out as one, trampling over each other in the rush to escape. Scobie was ahead of them, down the Opera House steps and off to the Botanic Gardens. The cameramen followed.

Bentley was right. It was great television.

'Shouldn't we go after him?' said Plant, picking himself off the floor.

Claudia sat there unmoving.

'He'll come back,' she said.

'And if he doesn't,' said Bentley, resting an arm on Plant's shoulder to straighten himself up, 'what does it matter? We've got you now.'

They sat on each side of him as the crowd milled out of the hall.

Chapter 26

Plant stood on the doorstep and pressed the intercom button. There was a delay and then a buzz and he announced himself. Plant. There was a further delay before the door opened and Tuscan Bayes stood there, in cosy knitted cardigan and carpet-slipper mode.

'Come in,' he said. And when the door was closed and bolted and sealed behind them he added, 'Excellent. Well done.' In the manner of one congratulating a junior officer from a great height. It was all Plant could do not to add 'Sir' to his 'Thank you.' But he had had lots of practice in not adding 'Sir.'

The two terry-towelled creative writing students peered down the stairwell. Bayes shooed them away and took Plant into the operations room. Newspapers were spread across the table. Photographs of Scobie's receding rump adorned their front pages.

'Most satisfactory,' said Bayes. 'Emblematic, really. What did you slip him?'

'Nothing,' said Plant.

'He's so pilled up there's no room for anything else, is that it?'

'Pretty much,' said Plant.

'Alas, poor Scabies,' said Bayes. 'In the words of the poet, parasite lost.'

'I got quite fond of him in the end,' said Plant.

'You got quite fond of Claudia, too, I hear,' said Bayes.

Plant neither confirmed nor denied. He was not sure that fond was quite the word, but he let it pass.

'We weren't paying you for that, you know.'

'No.'

'Still, treat it as a bonus.'

Plant said nothing.

'So will you be moving in permanently?'

'I don't know.'

'No, I don't suppose you would. Claudia's very fickle. In my experience. Which I'm sure she's told you about.'

'Yes,' said Plant.

'Drink?' asked Bayes.

Plant accepted a bourbon.

'Cheers,' Bayes. 'Well, that's about it.'

'Yes,' said Plant.

'There's no point carrying on hiring you to report on Scobie if Scobie's not around to report on any more.'

'No,' said Plant.

'And you won't be short of a few bob if you're settled down with Claudia.'

Plant shrugged.

'Of course,' said Bayes, 'it could all go badly wrong. Scobie banged up in some bughouse and the books mysteriously writing themselves.'

'Yes.'

'Dodgy, decidedly dodgy.'

'Uh-huh.'

'There might be a credibility factor. I think I'd start looking for another job if I were you. I'm not sure there's going to be much of a future in ghosting Scobie.'

'You want to knock him off the board altogether?'

'Not at all, why would I want that?' said Bayes. 'Though on the other hand, why pick him back up after all that effort?'

'It wasn't a matter of effort, he did it to himself. I didn't do it.'

'Of course not,' said Bayes. 'Who ever said anything about doing? You were hired to report, not to do.'

'Yes,' said Plant.

'Though an awful lot does seem to have happened.'

'Things do tend to happen,' said Plant.

'Do they?' said Bayes.

'The observer inevitably influences the observed.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes.'

'Yes,' agreed Bayes. 'I had read that.'

'I'm sure you had,' agreed Plant.

They sipped their bourbon. Happy laughter tinkled down the stairwell.

'Can I ask what the reports were for?' Plant asked.

'You can, you may, but I am not sure that I shall tell you.'

'Are you writing a book on him?'

'Absolutely not. No way would I perpetuate that little non-entity's name.'

'Using him as a character?'

'Heaven forbid. I have no wish to confer immortality onto a character like that.'

'Fair enough,' said Plant.

He finished his drink. Tuscan did not offer him a refill.

'Well, if that's all –,' said Plant.

'I think it is,' said Bayes.

Plant sat there.

'Your final cheque, of course,' said Bayes. 'I'll need a tax invoice.'

'No problem,' said Plant. 'What do you want it made out to? Private investigations all right?'

'Oh no, I don't think so,' said Bayes. 'I think that sounds rather squalid, don't you?'

Plant sat there, squalid.

'Why don't you call it research assistance?'

